Interviews & Essays

SUN RA

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edited by

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BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

by Peter dennett

I am a musician, but I'm another type of musician.
I use music as a medium to talk to people.
I'm not a minister, I'm not a philosopher, I'm not a politician, I'm in another category.
Music is a language, you see, a universal language.

—Sun Ra

SUN RA (1914-93) was a major black musician and bandleader, a groundbreaking innovator of immense and extraordinary vision, 'the cornerstone of experimental jazz' whose mythology and intergalactic narrative navigated between Ancient Egypt and outerspace.

Sun Ra's performances with a large ensemble of musicians and dancers incorporated everything from thirties' big band swing to experimental funk and synthesizer pieces. He was also a master pianist whose published output exceeded 180 albums recorded for many American and European jazz labels and he toured extensively with his various ensembles between 1956 and 1993. He also did cover versions of Walt Disney tunes and recorded a couple of sides for a toy company, as well making films and documentaries about his philosophy and vision.

Sun Ra's music is associated with his musical navigation toward free jazz and his poetry toward cosmology and Egyptology. Sun Ra worked within the traditional established African American expressive traditions to develop a distinct compositional style and language fusing elements of the blues, ragtime, and spirituals with experimental electronic instruments, rhythm machines and invented instruments to present new musical dimensions. Ra was a 'cosmic guide' through black musical traditions, a twenty first century 'Tonal Guide to Times Tomorrow.'

Sun Ra is arguably one of the most influential and important of all twentieth century composers. Ra was a sonic explorer in revolutionary new forms of music: Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow.' His extraordinary work and time on this planet have yet to be fully appreciated.

SUN RA

by Amiri baraka

I PASSED THROUGH RA'S ORBIT when the Arkestra first arrived from Chicago into the Loisaida (pre Latino street signs), early sixties. They swept in, with tales and a frantic grapevine of every which observation.

The Weirdness, Outness, Way Outness, Otherness was immediate. Some space metaphysical philosophical surrealistic bop funk. Some blue pyramid home nigger southern different color meaning hip shit. Ra. Sun Ra.

Then they put on weird clothes, space helmets, robes, flowing capes. They did rituals played in rituals, evoked lost civilizations, used strangeness to teach us open feeling as intelligence.

In those cellars and lofts, Sun Ra spun a cosmic metaphor. He was a philosopher musician. He used music as language, and image.

His was an historical music. He began himself before he played with Fletcher Henderson, playing alternate piano in the orchestra when Fletcher conducted. In recent years he even brought Fletcher and Duke Ellington back with a sweetness and contemporary restatement that was thrilling.

Ra was so far out because he had the true self-consciousness of the Afro-American intellectual artist revolutionary. He knew our historic ideology and socio-political consciousness was freedom. It is an aesthetic and social dynamic. We think it is good and beautiful!

Sun Ra's consistent statement, musically and spoken, is that this is a primitive world. Its practices, beliefs, religions are uneducated, unenlightened, savage, destructive, already in the past.

That's why Ra left and returned only to say he left. Into the Future. Into Space. He played Interplanetary Music. He described *Angels and Demons at Play.* From his Heliocentric vision, Ra's music unfolded; it was always, it seemed, always there. What it was.

African American Review, Vol. 29,1995

SUN RA VISITS PLANET EARTH

by John Sinclair

People say I'm Herman Blount, but I don't know him. That's an imaginary person, he never existed. I have a sister and brother named Blount, but their father died 10 years before I arrived on the planet. He's not my father. If I tried to do anything with the name Sonny Blount, I couldn't . . . I'm not terrestrial, I'm a celestial being.

—Sun Ra, from John Diliberto's liner notes to
Sound Sun Pleasure (Evidence ECD-22014)

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN musical genius known as Sun Ra was a delightfully unique individual whose startlingly innovative Arkestra and provocative persona generated considerable myth and controversy during most of the second half of the twentieth century.

The legendary pianist, composer, bandleader, performance artist, musical pioneer and space philosopher was born Herman Blount in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, and was known to family and friends as "Sonny."

He attended Alabama A&M and played with bands around the South before settling in Chicago after World War II, where he worked at the Club DeLisa as second pianist and arranger with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra during 1947-49.

By the turn of the fifties Sonny Blount was writing music for the shows, rehearsing the chorus line, and leading the relief band at the Club DeLisa two nights a week.

He formed his own trio to back up vocalists, instrumentalists and floor-shows in local nightspots, soon landing a regular gig at Budland supporting visiting stars like Sarah Vaughan, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson, LaVerne Baker, Dakota Staton and comedian George Kirby.

AT THIS POINT THE PIANIST began his long association with Chicago philosopher/businessman Alton Abraham, a pragmatic mystic who would become his mentor, personal manager, booking agent, recording supervisor and business partner for the next quarter century.

With Abraham's guidance Herman "Sonny" Blount took the name "Le Sun Ra" and began to reveal an elaborate, unprecedented cosmic philosophy through his compositions, song titles, poetry, wild costumery, and an innovative, ever-expanding musical ensemble first called the Solar Arkestra.

The Arkestra, billed as playing "Music from tomorrow's world—Magic Music of the spheres," began its spectacular fifty eight year lifespan in 1952 in the form of a six-piece jazz combo organized to showcase Sun Ra's original compositions, arrangements and multi-media performance concepts.

There are photos of the Herman Blount Octet in Chicago in the mid fifties, identified as Pat Patrick (alto and baritone sax), John Gilmore (tenor sax), Dave Young (trumpet), Julian Priester (trombone), Richard Evans (bass), Bob Barry (drums), Jimmy Herndon (percussion) and Herman Blount (piano, leader).

With Abraham as its booking agent, early editions of the band worked five nights a week at Budland in the Pershing Hotel and played the Sunday dances at Robert's Show Club on South Parkway.

The Arkestra became a featured attraction at the Compass club on the far north side, alternating with a local comedy troupe that included Mike Nichols, Elaine May and Mort Sahl, and also worked steadily at the Wander Inn on Cottage Grove on the south side.

The band attracted young musicians from DuSable High School who had studied with Capt. Walter Dyett in the tradition of noted DuSable alumni like Nat 'King' Cole, Redd Foxx, Gene Ammons, Dorothy Donegan, Johnny Griffin and Joseph Jarman.

Visiting musicians were drawn to the provocative music and disciplined camaraderie of the Arkestra, and both Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane played and studied with the band in Chicago during the early- and mid fifties.

Historically, Sun Ra's compositions and arrangements followed the advances made in the forties by Tadd Dameron and Jimmy Mundy and were contemporaneous with the early experimental writing of Charles Mingus and George Russell.

Instrumentally, the Arkestra was an extension of the popular "little big-band" format of the late forties and early fifties, utilizing trumpet, trombone, two or three saxophones, piano, bass and drums.

THE ARKESTRA rehearsed at Pat Patrick's house five days a week at noon, experimenting with the radical instrumental combinations and advanced musical concepts devised by its leader.

Sometimes two basses (one double bass, one electric), two drummers, two baritone saxophones and other odd pairings were effected; often tympani, bells, and other then-exotic percussion instruments were used to add new colors to the band's distinctive sound.

Other early musical innovations included Sun Ra's pioneering use of electric piano, Solovox, clavioline, Hammond organ, Farfisa organ and electric bass; rich arco double bass passages; group chanting; a saxophone section which doubled on flute, oboe, bassoon, bass clarinet and percussion instruments; and a massed percussion choir throbbing with African and Afro-Cuban polyrhythms.

Sun Ra's avant-garde compositions introduced a "space key" where players were instructed to improvise without regard for conventional tonal centers; modal pieces with no fixed harmonic structure; superimposition of one chord over another; and songs played in multiple keys.

His works wove a musical tapestry of unusual rhythms and colors, swinging like crazy at will or moving entirely out of regular time to project a musical environment evocative of outerspace.

Sun Ra's use of futuristic keyboards and unusual instrumental voicings goes back to his earliest recordings. He accompanied violinist Stuff Smith in 195354 with an ensemble comprising tenor saxophone, trumpet, two basses, drums, percussion and his own Solovox keyboard.

The ensemble then expanded to include three trumpets, six or seven reeds, two or three drummers, electric and acoustic bassists, an assortment

of vocalists and an ever-increasing arsenal of electronic keyboard instruments.

The Arkestra's stage presentation was equally advanced: its members wore fezzes over green shirts and rust-colored pants, then graduated to futuristic Afro-space costumes featuring colorful sequin-studded robe-like garments and makeshift space helmets equipped with flashing lights like men in a mine shaft.

AMONG THE MANY NOTED MUSICIANS who served in the Arkestra during its residency in Chicago (1952-61) were reedmen Marshall Allen, James Spaulding, Charles Davis and James Scales; trumpeters Hobart Dotson, Phil Cohran, George Hudson, Art Hoyle, Dave Young, Lucious Randolph and Walter Strickland; trombonists Julian Priester and Nate Pryor; bassists Ronnie Boykins, Wilburn Green (electric), Vic Sproles and Richard Evans; drummers William Cochran, Jim Herndon, Robert Barry, Edward Skinner and Nimrod Hunt; and vocalists Hatty Randolph and Clyde Williams.

Sun Ra's musical concepts and extra-musical concerns profoundly influenced an entire generation of Chicago musicians who became active in pianist/ composer Muhal Richard Abrams' Experimental Orchestra and later in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), as well as experimental jazz artists elsewhere like John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Pharoah Sanders, Cecil Taylor and Marion Brown.

Organizationally, with long-time partner Alton Abraham, Sun Ra also had a deep and lasting effect on the self-determination movement in jazz. He established his own music publishing company, Enterplanetary Koncepts; his own production company, Infinity Inc.; and his own Saturn Records imprint which issued a series of iconoclastic LPs beginning around 1964.

Recorded in Chicago during the fifties and packaged in crude space-age cover designs, these albums came bearing titles like *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth, We Travel the Spaceways, Super-Sonic Jazz* and *Secrets of the Sun,* boldly presenting the idiosyncratic compositional creations of Sun Ra delivered with exceptional musicianship by the Solar Arkestra.

While he would go on to record for and lease masters to a variety of labels, including Transition, Savoy, ESP-Disk, Delmark, Blue Thumb and

ABC/Impulse, Ra continued to issue albums on Saturn Records all his life so that as much of his music as possible could be documented and made available to his small but fanatical public.

In 1961 the Arkestra left Chicago to play at the World's Fair in Montreal and then traveled down to New York City, where they became stranded after their vehicle broke down.

Some of the members drifted back to Chicago under their own power, but Sun Ra and his core contingent—John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Pat Patrick, Ronnie Boykins, Clifford Jarvis and James Jacson—settled into a small apartment at 48 East 3rd Street and quickly became a vital part of the city's burgeoning avant-garde jazz community.

In New York City between 1961-72, the Arkestra veterans were joined by a host of New York-based musicians, including reedmen Ronnie Cummings, Marion Brown, Pharoah Sanders, Eloe Omoe and many others; trumpeters Kwame Hadi, Walter Miller, Clifford Thornton, Manny Smith and Ahktal Ebah; trombonists Ali Hassan, Teddy Nance, Kiane Zawadi (Bernard McKin-ney) and Bernard Pettaway; bassists Alejandro Blake and John Ore; percussionists Tommy Hunter, Lex Humphries, William Brister, Robert Cummings, Roger Blank and C. Scoby Stroman; and the great vocalist June Tyson.

After a fertile decade at the center of creative activity in New York City, the Arkestra moved en masse to Philadelphia, where Marshall Allen's father had offered the band a large house at 5626 Morton Avenue.

The City of Brotherly Love served as their base for the next twenty years as Sun Ra continued to develop the Arkestra's musical vocabulary and spectacular presentation style.

BY THIS TIME THE ARKESTRA was universally recognized as the premiere avant-garde big band in jazz. Like Duke Ellington, Sun Ra had developed the Arkestra as a means of realizing his unique compositional concepts and created works built around the musical personalities of its members.

As a bandleader, Ra always demanded a high level of musical and orchestral discipline as a means to unprecedented freedom of expression

and achieved these goals through long hours of daily rehearsals.

These musical workouts were augmented by endless lectures on every topic under the sun until, somehow, Ra would manage to nail everything to the cosmic framework of his interplanetary vision.

In Philadelphia Sun Ra expanded the Arkestra's repertoire to include classical jazz pieces from the twenties and thirties by Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunc-eford and others, plus compelling arrangements of pop standards associated with the jazz idiom like Stardust, Deep Purple and Over The Rainbow.

These traditional elements were woven into the fabric of the Arkestra's seamless five-hour public performances, presented in a stunning array of rhythms and colors featuring Ra's boldly conceived original works, anthemic space music compositions, wild group improvisations, throbbing multi-rhythmic orgies in percussion, June Tyson's other-worldly vocal performances, teams of energetic dancers, and compelling expositions of Ra's space philosophy set to music and chanted verse.

Almost invariably, at some point in the performance, the entire Arkestra would leave the stage to chant and snake-dance (or as they say in New Orleans, "second-line") through the audience.

Over the course of its existence the Arkestra operated under several banners—Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra, Space Arkestra, Solar-Myth Arkestra, Astro-Infinity Arkestra, Intergalactic Discipline Arkestra, Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra—according to the particular musico-philosophical goals Ra had established for each discrete series of performances or recordings to be undertaken.

During the late seventies and throughout the eighties, after Sun Ra had broadened the Arkestra's musical palette, he would bill the band as the Omniverse Arkestra and, when they starting touring regularly, as the Omniverse Jet-Set Arkestra.

There was nothing like seeing and hearing Sun Ra and his fabulous Arkestra in the full flight of performance. To witness his space philosophy in action as interpreted by the carefully trained Arkestra was sure to provide aesthetic thrills beyond measure.

There was only one Sun Ra, and the world lost one of the most colorful and beloved figures in twentieth century creative music when the celebrated pianist, composer and bandleader left Planet Earth on Sunday, May 30, 1993.

SUN RA: THE CLASSIC RECORDINGS 1955-1970

THE RECORDED OUTPUT of Sun Ra and his Arkestra is almost beyond measure. Beginning in 1953, when Sun Ra and Alton Abraham determined to document the Arkestra's music through a series of self-financed recording sessions, and continuing almost until the composer's death in 1993, Sun Ra recorded hundreds of his compositions with the Arkestra and saw to their release with the establishment of his own record company, El Saturn Records.

Sun Ra made his first real breakthrough with the record buying public in 1972 as a result of his triumphant appearance at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival (available on the CD *Life Is Splendid)* and the release of his brilliant *Space Is The Place* suite on the pop music label Blue Thumb Records (now available on CD as MCA/Impulse IMPD-249).

Soon Impulse Records had rushed into print an entire series of albums licensed from Ra and Alton Abraham, and the Arkestra went on to enjoy a long and amazingly productive recording career with scores of LPs and CDs issued by a dazzling variety of record labels all over the world.

While his recordings from 1972-92 enjoyed an ever-widening currency among adventurous listeners, the vast majority of Sun Ra's early works were available only on the tiny El Saturn label operated by Alton Abraham from P.O. Box 7124, Chicago 6, Illinois.

Indeed, except for the occasional outside session—for Transition Records in 1957, Savoy in 1961, and ESP-Disk in 1965-66—El Saturn Records would be the principal outlet for the music of Sun Ra and the Arkestra for its first twenty years.

Packaged with bizarre hand-drawn cover art and often adorned with Sun Ra's poems and mystical writings, the El Saturn LPs presented the musical creations and visionary philosophy of the great composer and bandleader

and were passed almost from hand to hand among the Arkestra's family, friends and followers who were fortunate enough to get their hands on a maddenly elusive copy.

LISTENING TO THE EL SATURN RECORDINGS (now available on a remarkable Evidence Records series of fifteen CDs of music recorded by Ra and Abraham between 1955 and 1970) provides the opportunity to trace the development of Sun Ra's incredible musical genius and its manifestation through performance by his exquisitely disciplined ensemble.

From its origins in Chicago to its emergence in New York City ten years later as a completely unique jazz orchestra dedicated to exploring the new frontiers in music mapped out by its leader, the Arkestra can be heard negotiating its difficult course through Ra's constantly expanding musical universe and making hours and hours of delightful, challenging music in the process.

With the assistance of Alton Abraham, Sun Ra began making rough recordings of his Arkestra as early as 1953. These first efforts, backing violinist Stuff Smith on a Sun Ra arrangement of Deep Purple, can be heard on *Sound Sun Pleasure* (Evidence ECD 22014).

A set of five standard tunes arranged by Ra (also on the *Sound Sun Pleasure* CD) was recorded in 1955 by an ensemble which included saxophonist John Gilmore, Art Hoyle on trumpet, Victor Sproles and Ronnie Boykins on basses, and drummer Robert Barry.

THE ARKESTRA BEGAN RECORDING in earnest by 1956, cutting original compositions like New Horizons (on *We Travel the Spaceways/Bad and Beautiful,* Evidence ECD 22038), Saturn and Two Tones (on *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth/Interstellar Low Ways,* Evidence ECD 22039), and a set of Ra creations titled Medicine For A Nightmare, A Call For All Demons and Demon's Lullaby (on *Angels and Demons at Play/The Nubians of Plutonia,* Evidence ECD-22066).

Fledging producer Tom Wilson signed the Arkestra for two LP sessions for his Transition label in 1957. Only the first was released, as *Jazz By Sun* Ra (now available as *Sun Song,* Delmark DD-411), with the composer taking this opportunity to spring full-blown onto the world stage with a

comprehensive program of imaginative original works for orchestra and an accompanying pamphlet which laid out his space philosophy in poetry, prose and photos.

The recordings from the two Transition album sessions in 1957 (the second, unissued Transition date is available as *Sound of Joy,* Delmark DD-414) unleashed the oblique but hard-swinging mid fifties sound of Sun Ra and the Arkestra in all its glory, introducing compositions titled Brainville, Lullaby For Realville, Future, Sun Song, Planet Earth, Ankh, Saturn and El Is A Sound Of Joy, and adding Dave Young (trumpet), Julian Priester (trombone), Pat Patrick and Charles Davis (saxophones), William Cochran (drums) and Jim Herndon (tympani and timbales) to the core group of Ra, Gilmore, Hoyle, and Sproles.

BY 1958 THE ARKESTRA had expanded to ten or eleven pieces, five of them saxophones: John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, Charles Davis, James Spaulding and Marshall Allen. With Hobart Dotson on trumpet, Julian Priester on trombone, and Boykins and Cochran in the rhythm section, the Arkestra recorded a program of provocative Sun Ra compositions including Enlightenment, Ancient Aiethopia, Hours After, Horoscope and Images, which would be issued some years later as *Jazz In Silhouette: Images and Forecasts of Tomorrow* (El Saturn LP 205, now available on CD as Evidence ECD-22012).

Ra and Abraham continued to document the composer's work with the Arkestra in Chicago with sessions held between 1958 and 1960 which captured Sun Ra themes like Interplanetary Music, Tapestry From An Asteroid, Space Loneliness, Tiny Pyramids, Between Two Worlds, Music From The World Tomorrow, Plutonian Nights, Nubia, Africa and Watusa, a staple of the Arkestra's repertoire for years to come.

The Arkestra's last days in Chicago in 1960-61 produced recordings of compositions like Space Mates, Lights Of A Satellite, Distant Stars, The Others In Their World, and Rocket Number 9 Take Off For The Planet Venus, another piece that would stay in the Arkestra's repertoire for many years (and probably heard to best advantage on the Blue Thumb *Space Is the Place* album). This ensemble featured three trumpets, trombone, and only two saxophones.

In 1961 Sun Ra and the Arkestra resettled in New York City and brought their wildly original music, space-age philosophy, fierce musical discipline and communal economic organization into the center of the city's creative music community.

Many visionary young players—including Marion Brown, Pharoah Sanders, Lex Humphries, Roger Blank and Ali Hassan—soon sought them out in order to study, rehearse and perform with the Arkestra.

In New York Sun Ra first organized a 1961 session at the Choreographers Workshop with core members John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Pat Patrick and Ronnie Boykins, joined by drummer Tommy "Bugs" Hunter, to record a program of standards and originals (Ankh, Searchlight Blues) later released as the El Saturn LP *Bad and Beautiful* and now on the Evidence CD *We Travel the Spaceways/Bad and Beautiful* (ECD-22038).

Ra also crossed paths again with producer Tom Wilson, now out of college and making a series of provocative albums by John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, Charles Mingus, Bill Evans and others, for labels like United Artists and Savoy.

Wilson got the Arkestra a date with Savoy in October 1961 and delivered *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* (on CD as Savoy Jazz SV-0213), a program of compositions like Where Is Tomorrow, Looking Outward and Space Jazz Reverie performed by the core group plus New Yorkers Kiane Zawadi and onetime Thelonious Monk drummer Willie Jones.

Between 1961 and 1963 the Arkestra recorded several New York City sessions at their own expense, realizing new Sun Ra compositions like We Travel The Spaceways, Calling Planet Earth, When Sun Comes Out, Voice Of Space, Cluster Of Galaxies, Solar Drums, Lights On A Satellite and Infinity Of The Universe, now available on the Evidence Records CDs titled *When Sun Comes Out* (ECD-22068) and *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy/Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* (ECD-22036).

During this fertile period the Arkestra continued to grow in scope, in proficiency and in number as Sun Ra's master plan began to take visible shape

By now the reed section had doubled, with Danny Davis, Robert Cummings and James Jackson joining Gilmore, Allen and Patrick; drummers

Lex Humphries, Clifford Jarvis, Tommy Hunter and C. Scoby Stroman were on board; Clifford Thornton, Walter Miller and Manny Smith came in on trumpets, along with trombonists Teddy Nance, Bernard Pettaway and Ali Hassan, and former Monk bassist John Ore.

Sun Ra and the Arkestra also became involved in the avant-garde jazz movement that would produce the Jazz Composers Guild—an alliance of radical composers including Carla Bley, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Roswell Rudd, Bill Dixon, Paul Bley and others, who proposed to form a producers' cooperative to record and issue their own album productions—and, in the fall of 1964, mounted the *October Revolution in Jazz,* a series of self-produced concerts showcasing the original music of Guild members and their ensembles which brought their music to the attention of the somewhat hidebound modern jazz community.

By this time Sun Ra and Alton Abraham had decided to begin to exploit the vast catalog of master recordings they had assembled over the past ten years by launching their own El Saturn Records label. The initial El Saturn releases— *Fate in a Pleasant Mood, Interstellar Low Ways, Super-Sonic Jazz, Jazz in Silhouette, Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth*—were mostly drawn from recordings made in Chicago, but soon Sun Ra's startling new compositional concepts and arrangements would be revealed in a series of contemporaneous releases which clearly established the composer at the forefront of modern music.

The major works Other Planes Of There (1964), at twenty two minutes, and The Magic City (1965), at over twenty seven minutes of ceaseless invention, introduced Sun Ra's extended form and all-encompassing vision to stunning effect with music which had simply never been heard before.

The Arkestra reached a slightly larger audience with its three albums for Bernard Stollman's ESP-Disk label in 1965-66. *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun* Ra, *Volumes 1 & 2* (ESP-Disk 1014 and 1017), with the extended works Cosmic Chaos and The Sun Myth, are in a class with The Magic City, and the 'live' recording, *Nothing Is* (ESP-Disk 1045), presents the Arkestra in all its splendor as it appeared on stage, featuring vocal chants on Sun Ra And His Band From Outer Space, Theme Of The Stargazers and Next Stop Mars and unbridled improvisational passages by Arkestra

saxophone mainstays John Gilmore, Marshall Allen and Pat Patrick throughout.

While their ESP-Disk releases attracted the attention of the jazz press and a small coterie of avant-garde jazz enthusiasts, the demand for any kind of jazz recordings—let alone the most advanced manifestations of the idiom—continued its steep decline in the wake of the rock revolution and its utter dominance of the popular music marketplace.

But Sun Ra continued to maintain a strong presence among his dedicated listener base by issuing a continuous stream of El Saturn releases offering music recorded between 1956 and 1970, including *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow, The Lady with the Golden Stockings, Angels and Demons at Play, Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy, We Travel the Spaceways, Atlantis, Sound Sun Pleasure* and *My Brother the Wind.*

EL SATURN RECORDS

NOTE: Since the lowest numbered El Saturn LP release here (LP 202) includes material recorded by the Arkestra in New York City in 1963, it seems apparent that the label issued its first releases in New York City in 1964.

LP 202 *Fate in a Pleasant Mood* (Chicago 1960/NYC 1963) (ECD-22068)

LP 203 *Interstellar Low Ways* (Chicago 1960) (ECD-22039)

LP 204 *Super-Sonic Jazz* (Chicago 1956) (ECD-22015)

LP 205 *Jazz in Silhouette* (Chicago 1958) (ECD-22012)

LP 206 *Other Planes of There* (NYC 1964) (ECD-22037)

LP 207 *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth* (Chicago 1956-58) (ECD-22039)

LP 403 *The Magic City* (NYC 1965) (ECD 22069)

LP 404 *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* (NYC 1963) (ECD-22036)

LP 405 *When Angels Speak of Love* (NYC 1666) (ECD-22216)

LP 406 *The Lady with the Golden Stockings (The Nubians of Plutonia)* (Chicago 1958-59) (ECD-22066)

LP 407 *Angels and Demons at Play* (Chicago 1956) (ECD-22066)

LP 408 *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy* (NYC 1961) (ECD-22036)
LP 409 *We Travel the Spaceways* (Chicago 1956) (ECD-22038)
LP 507 *Atlantis* (NYC 1967-69) (ECD-22067)
LP 512 *Sound Sun Pleasure* (Chicago 1958-60) (ECD-22014)
LP 523 *My Brother the Wind* (NYC 1969-70) (ECD-22040)
LP 532 *Bad and Beautiful* (Chicago 1960) (ECD-22038)
LP 2066 *When Sun Comes Out* (NYC 1963) (ECD-22068)

EVDENCE RECORDS: EL SATURN ON CD

ECD-22011 *Holiday for Soul Dance*
ECD-22012 *Jazz in Silhouette*
ECD-22013 *Monorails and Satellites*
ECD-22014 *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*
ECD-22015 *Super-Sonic Jazz*
ECD-22036 *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy/Art Forms of DimensionsTomorrow*
ECD-22037 *Other Planes of There*
ECD-22038 *We Travel the Spaceways/Bad and Beautiful*
ECD-22039 *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth/Interstellar Low Ways*
ECD-22040 *My Brother the Wind Vol II*
ECD-22066 *Angels and Demons at Play/The Nubians of Plutonia*
ECD-22067 *Atlantis*
ECD-22068 *Fate in a Pleasant Mood/When Sun Comes Out*
ECD-22069 *The Magic City*
ECD-22070 *Space Is The Place (Film Soundtrack, 1972)*
ECD-22164 *Ra: The Singles (1954-1982)*
Sun

IT KNOCKS ON EVERYBODY'S DOOR

DETROIT SUN INTERVIEW WITH SUN RA
48 E. 3rd St., New York City, August 1966
by John Sinclair

JOHN SINCLAIR:
I guess we can talk about the planet . . .

SUN RA: Well, the planet is in such a bad condition that it's inexpressible. It was bad enough but now it's got worse. They're not sure about their religions, they're not sure about their politics, they're not sure about education and philosophy, they're not sure about anything . . . so you've got complete confusion.

Utter Chaos . . .

They had utter chaos, then ultra chaos . . . it's knocking on everybody's door. In the past things came and knocked on a few people's doors, but this is a different age. It's like the atomic bomb, it knocks on everybody's door. That makes a different story. Everybody's involved.

I don't think everybody's caught up in this chaos, I mean, I think we both know people who have got something to offer. Instead of that.

Yeah, they got something to offer, but can they do anything about it? That's the problem. Just to have something to offer isn't enough now. So many men and women have come around with something to offer, and some of them became successful, but that doesn't mean anything. Maybe success meaning that they were recognized by the masses or by the rulers, one or the other, but they really don't have any power to retain any success. They're here today and gone tomorrow. If they would come over into another environment or another planet, they wouldn't be successful.

And most of them are caught up in their little bags, in their own little thing, and I call that an eternity—they're over in a cycle, an eternity, a

circle. so they stay over in there, because there's comparative safety there—seemingly. And they stay over in there until some unknown force strikes the surface and snatches them out of there and they disappear—they're not on the planet. So they really didn't make it.

Real security means you have protection, I'd say, forever. Even people with guns and all that, like policemen, they don't have any security. something'll snatch them away too. They talk about protecting a state or a government, but they can't even protect themselves. There's something knocking at everybody's door, and it's not to be denied. Governments know it. because people are changing, a lot people are getting so they just don't care, you know, something is happening but they just don't have any go-it-iveness [sic] or initiative. So how are you going to rule if you have people like that? If you got people who don't care?

So, actually, the rulers on this planet are in trouble. And I sympathize with them. The people are slowing down more and more, and they're changing every day. So it's gotten to that point now. and this is where a lot of musicians don't really see it. They got their new music, and their new thing, and that's nice, that's a thrill, but what's going to happen after the thrill dies down? What good's music if you don't have people to play it for? When you got people who are hopeless, it's contagious.

So many of the musicians are seeking to escape from all that, I can see that, and for a long time the musicians could escape—but now they're faced with something else. They got to change the way they write, they got to change the way they play, and of course it comes down to strict discipline. The people have had freedom, but they really haven't done anything. I'm not even interested in it, because that doesn't help anybody. The only freedom they'll get is over in the cemetery; then they'll be free. It's a scientific truth: people are only free when they're dead.

So actually, if I was ruling, I wouldn't let the people talk about freedom. I wouldn't let the people talk about freedom, I wouldn't let them fight for it, I wouldn't let them speak of it . . . I wouldn't let them talk about peace, I wouldn't let them picket for it, I wouldn't let them have anything to do with peace. Because the whole thing is very simple: they're free when they're dead, and they're at rest, and at peace when they're dead. It actually says so: Rest in peace.

So when the United States be talking about peace, it's talking about death. They mean that kind of peace. And when the people got a Prince of Peace, the Prince would have to be Death. Of course, this is another kind of mathematics I'm doing . . . it's something that they can see if they'll just go and look in the cemetery. There's a lot of people out there—it's a city, they got more people out there than they got on the planet walking around. And they are showing you what peace is. Because they at peace—final peace, definite, absolute peace. Now they're free, too—and nothing bothers their freedom. They're free to be dead.

I've had a lot of difficulty trying to tell people that they should investigate that peace and that freedom, because what I'm trying to tell them is too incredible to be true. They say that truth is stranger than fiction, but I know one thing—I balance my equations, and I balance them scientifically, and I know that that's the main thing bothering this planet. It's come out in the open now—not all that power—the power of peace and freedom. and equality.

The only equality they got too, is that all of them die. I notice that all of them don't have the same amount of money, though, or the same amount of opportunity—so it's not really true. I know I never had some opportunities that I should have had—I never had them—probably because I wasn't interested in them. Too limited.

You say you've changed the name of the band from the Myth-Science Arkestra to the Astro-Infinity Arkestra. . . .

Well, actually I didn't change it—that's just one of the dimensions. Because when I play sometimes I use "Myth-Science"—I've got some songs that come under that—and then I had some under the Solar Arkestra. and then I got the Astro-Infinity—and all of them mean different things to me.

Other Planes of There. . . .

Yes. all of them are based on these other planes, which is actually. I mean I think people need them now. They should be trying them out; see what'll happen. In fact they're gonna have to—because I might be on Jupiter or Mars by then. Because I'm not stopping my program.

Now I got the Solar Arkestra, the Myth-Science, and the Astro-Infin-ity —and soon I'll have something else. Just like a university—I've got my different courses set up—and they deal with things that are going to be beneficial to people. But it's not religious, like some people are saying—I'm not the least bit religious, I'm not interested in that. Because churches don't do anything but bring people. peace.

What I'm talking about is discipline—striving for things that will never be, they need to discipline themselves so they can do something beneficial for people. But they keep talking about peace. Like I say, the only time they'll be peaceful is when they're dead—they'll look very peaceful then, and they'll BE very peaceful.

Now, my contention is that some people or some intelligence has fixed up words for people, and they got a choice of what they want. There are some words that sound very bad, but they are very good for people. And there are some words that sound very good, but they are very bad. And this is what is really happening on this planet—it's very simple. Some intelligence set up words, and enticed the people to be part of that word. They set up civilizations, churches, educational systems, all based on words. You can see that something is wrong—and if something is wrong, it must be the educational system and what it teaches them to think. It's in the political system, and the religious system, it's even over in the science department so to speak.

What does the music have to do with this, then?

The music . . . a lot of musicians are ideal, they're in tune with the earth, they're in tune with the people—please the people—they please the people or please the rulers. They're the ones who've got the money. They're playing what the people want, or what they say the people want. But these musicians are really quite afraid—afraid of stepping beyond tradition, into something that would require new ways of thinking and new ways of action.

However, they're not afraid to go out there in space and all, like the astronauts. because it's necessary in these times. And it's necessary for them to keep agitating for peace, and to keep killing each other like they do. That's the main thing about science, that it's set up to find new ways for

people to kill each other. And yet I used to think that was so bad. but now, after looking at people, the more I see them I'm not going to condemn them for eliminating each other—not any more I'm not—not when I see what they are. I thought they were very nice and true and spiritual and it hurt me to see them doing what they do.

But now it doesn't bother me, because I'm involved with my other planes of discipline. I'm trying to discipline my self—I mean my other self, because I'm not too worried about my self. Because they teach you not to be selfish anyway, not to think about your self. So I think about my other self—that's the self that's never really had a chance.

The music that I'm playing, that's my other self playing. And that disturbs some people because they never gave that other self a chance. The natural self. So that's my natural self playing. And it's very serious—a lot of people think they can just come on this planet and do what they want to do, be what they want to be, and there's no repercussions whatsoever. But that's not true.

It's not a matter of having no hell—this is hell here—but it's just a matter of eventually reaping just what you sow. Whether it's good or bad. You set up something, and then it starts to happen. It's like when I started studying, I wanted to find out what was happening on this planet. Then I found out that it's in a worse condition than I ever dreamed of, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it. But since I had set that up as my objective, I can't avoid it.

How did you start studying?

I suppose it started back when I was going to Sunday school . . . and I just didn't feel like going there. I liked to walk around with my friends in the sun and talk and see each other. That's what we'd do—play hookey from Sunday school and walk around in the sun and talk—three or four of us —I felt happy then, being outside of school, because they taught the same thing every year—it was like a commercial thing—never anything else.

I never learned anything in school—just repeating words. The people in the school were nice—they were nice people—but there was just something

wrong. Then I had to really study, read a lot of books. Then I went to college, and that was interesting too, read a lot of books there, but the men who taught me didn't prove anything.

The point about it was, if there wasn't a God, then people wouldn't die. I came to that conclusion, that the only reason people died was because there is a God, and the only reason people are suffering is because there is a God. The way to look at it, the way people die proves that something is killing them—something superior to them always wins. A superior force. So death is a god, if nothing else, and all people are subject to it, so death's their god. They aren't actually subject to the United States or Russia or anything, they're subject to their god—Death. That's very obvious. The point is, having reached that point, what to do about it? If they ever reach that point, should they be obedient to the god Death or should they be rebels? Because if they're obedient to God and are righteous, then the most appropriate thing to do is to die. Then, when they're dead, they're holy and righteous.

What happens if you rebel?

If you rebel, then you move over into uncharted paths and. and of course they won't like it. What would God look like if his subjects were to rebel? But you don't have nothing to lose—because you don't have anything anyway, really. I don't see anything Death gets people—might send them some flowers, but they can't even smell them. The only thing it offers them is . . . absolute peace.

It's so ridiculous to say that everybody has to die—it's a waste of time—people with magnificent minds, magnificent talents, why can't they keep on going on? Because it doesn't even make sense that they shouldn't. That's what I'm talking about in my music—all my music really has happiness over in it. and people can listen to it and get that from it.

I know I got something to help people but—I don't know what to do about it. I can put it over in music, the happiness in that or what I call the space feeling—it's in the music and everybody can hear that. I've got some beauty for them, too—there's no sadness over in that. Not the way most musicians do. they have very great emotions. I appreciate every musician, I don't care what kind of music they play. I appreciate anything that any

musician does on a planet like this one. It's very heartening in a sense to find somebody trying to do something besides killing people.

Like I wrote a number—I think the name of it was If I Had A Ham-mer—and some gospel group did it. It was a masterpiece the way they did it—they feel it and I appreciate that. But unfortunately some jazz musicians speak against this form of music—the new form of music—and this is very bad because it's very narrow-minded. It's not right.

Because jazz in the earlier days—the musicians were innovators and they were playing something that wasn't according to the status quo and they appreciated one another and anybody who DID something different they appreciated them and supported them—even if they couldn't play it they supported it—they didn't talk about it and all that.

You got a case where a lot of successful musicians and some people who say they are musicians are talking against innovators of music. It's very bad to find that musicians want to restrict another musician. I don't see the artists restricting the artists, I really don't see that. Even in religion I notice the churches—the Catholic Church is getting liberal and changing their rules. Even governments are relaxing their rules and laws.

Now a case like that, where all these diehards and at least the people who just held to the status quo are beginning to see that they're going to have to give in—it's imperative that all musicians stop criticizing their brother musicians because they're innovators and they really should be happening and they really should be taking some of the money they're making and putting up some sums and be right there with them listening or helping because they don't have anything to lose. In fact they could invest in them and make themselves some money.

Now they're trying to be selfish in an art that you're not supposed to be selfish in. Because you can go all the way back and see that the musicians used to be minstrels—troubadors—they weren't selfish—they were out there playing for people. Now a lot of people are getting to say that musicians are trying to be politicians or trying to be religious and all of that, but that's not necessarily true. They're only doing what their brother musicians did, through the ages. They gave what they had to give because

they were interested in people and they came out and brought something people needed.

Just like people need music now. Even the Army can't get along without it—they got their band, and the Marines got their band and the Navy and the Air Force got their band and everything has its music. They got to have that. Now why can't people just have bands? They're fighting too, just like any soldier—they're fighting a battle to exist every day and their morale gets low too.

So I would say that if governments are going to have bands to keep up the morale of their soldiers and the ones who pay the soldiers are the people, why can't they have bands to keep the morale of the people up? I think they do deserve something because they're paying so much taxes and they're paying the politicians' salary and they're keeping the thing going, so they should not be deprived of music and entertainment . . . they deserve some entertainment just as much as soldiers do.

I'm not saying that soldiers should not have it. They need it. If they're going to be in the business of murder incorporated. Because that's really all it is and even a simple child knows that. I go by feeling and spirit too. I'm not "righteous" but I know that spirits can tune in on other spirits, and these people's spirits are plenty low.

So you come down to the point where you've got to have a better world. Now my contribution is in the music. In the first place, I feel that people have got to know—they got to know what happens as is. Now, they've never really been happy on this planet because they didn't ever have anything to be happy about. So then I show them in the music and give a feeling of happiness so they'll know when they're happy and when they're sad.

But I really don't think people know the difference between good & evil and right & wrong on this planet. They simply don't think . . . Now, to some people it seems like the music doesn't have anything to do with what I'm talking about, but it does. Because music is a language and I'm speaking these things over in it. So in order to understand the music people will have to know some of the thoughts I'm thinking. They'll know what I'm thinking and what I really want, and they will have a better understanding.

Now, my music is about a better place for people to live, not to have a place where they have to die to get there, I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about a place where they can live a method out—my equation is that it's very bad to live and it's very bad to die, because if you live you die and if you die you live. because here's an equation set up that's fooling folks.

Now, the same thing happens in music. There's a certain place a musician reaches where he bases what he's doing on laws. So if you reach a certain point then there's nothing binding or holding you back. If you study long enough, or if you feel in tune with something, you've got a perfect right to express yourself.

That's what I've done—I've passed the point of the law, and yet when people really see what I'm doing it does follow the law—it doesn't really break the law, but it's an advanced point of it in a sense. I'm capable of doing it and I do it naturally, and actually I should have had a chance some time ago to write not only for my band, but for other musicians to share what I'm doing as well. So they can learn something, too.

Because I know I always learn from other musicians, like when I play in somebody else's band I always learn something, I always appreciated what they were doing. It's wonderful for a musician to write an arrangement, to create something, and you play it and see what his ideas are. It's quite a pleasure. And I certainly played in a lot of bands—they didn't even know that I could arrange, because I never really cared about it. It was just a matter of fate pushing me into other people's eyesight.

Because I do have something to offer them other than music. And they have to face it, because I have to face it you see. They're going to have to really consider it. And that goes for preachers, too. I feel sorry for them. I don't know of anybody I feel more sorry for, unless it's the President of the United States or the people who are ruling. Because they got a job on their hands.

Because they're changing ages—one age moves over into another one, and the rulers—they're in trouble. You've got not only a change of age, but a change of laws—the law that has been the law on this planet has moved over to no longer be the law. Now when that happens, and since this planet for thousands of years has been up under that law of death and destruction,

it’s moving over into something else which I choose to call MYTH, a MYTH-SCIENCE, because it’s something that people don’t know anything about.

That’s why I’m using the name MYTH-SCIENCE ARKESTRA, because I’m interested in happiness for people, which is just a myth, because they’re not happy. I would say that the synonym for myth is happiness— because that’s why they go to the show, to the movies, they be sitting up there under these myths trying to get themselves some happiness.

And if the actors can indulge in myth, why can’t the musicians? They might be actors in sound, they got a right to do that, the only thing about musicians is that I notice they don’t do too much sticking together. So with the musicians, I try them out and see just what they can do—because I don’t consider myself part of this planet because I don’t act like them, and I’ve noticed that some people treat me very cruel and run over me just like they thought I was a fool. But it wasn’t that, I was sympathetic with them and trying to help them because I saw their terrible condition and thought that maybe they could see the point.

I feel that musicians are actually going to have to tell the truth about each other and be honest so they can get some respect from the world—because the world might not know these things like I’m saying, but they can FEEL them. They can feel it when a musician is not sincere, and this is the reason why a lot of people have got disinterested in musicians, because they feel so much phony-ism.

Musicians get it in their mind that they want to be great or they get up there and forget that they’re not really great, that there’s some musicians who have played things and have done things that had more value possibly than what they’re doing, because they were living in a different age and they were much happier. You can get some old records that are beautiful and you’ll never forget them. There’s a record by Duke Ellington called Jazz Cocktail and I. when I was growing up I always liked to listen to that record, it was really a masterpiece of arranging and had a lot of happiness in it . . .

It was sincere music, and sincere music is what’s happening now. The pretenders and the phonies are all done—they’ve had their day—and

they're producing some nice sounds. It's very strong, but they're not doing anything with it. One thing though, the musicians who are playing the new thing are going to have to learn music thoroughly, that's because I know it thoroughly you see. A lot of people say that I'm just playing around, but it's not like that. I know all the laws of music, I was reared up playing classics and I went to college and studied music for teachers' training, so I know music.

But I'm just following my own way, and I know what I'm doing. All the musicians in my band are thoroughly trained, they can read anything, and they have to be able to do that if they're going to work with my band. Every one of them—schooled musicians—in fact, I had to unschool them. And I'm still doing it. That's the way it is.

Do you want to make any last statement?

Yes . . . You know, I feel that the colleges are looking for something that's different, but I feel that there are some blocks between my music and the people who would understand what I'm talking about and could help me. But some way they have been blocked from it, and they don't know what I know, and they should be trying to find out. I know what they know, too, that's pretty one-sided, I know what they know and they don't know what I know. I took time out to study what they know, and it's nice, and they should take time out to study what I know, and they should compare it to what they know. So they can get someplace. That's what should be happening.

COSMIC CATALYST

SUN RA'S HELIOCENTRIC UNIVERSE

by David Henderson

BACK IN THE late sixties Sun Ra's floor-through on 3rd Street was crowded with keyboards and instrument cases for the many horns in his sound. And many drums, dominated by the huge father drum Jackson often stood behind in performance on the right rear of the stage.

I would sit while Sun Ra rehearsed the Arkestra, often giving long lectures in the midst of a composition that was not being played to his liking. He was quick to refer to the discipline of his mother planet Saturn and how that manifested in his mission to bring this musical spirituality to those on Earth.

He viewed himself as an interplanetary universal concept, within a world context, and also a historical context—the name Ra inherited from Egyptian deification. He identified with ancient Egyptian mysteries, as did other African Americans he knew or whose books and essays he followed, those also seeking a deeper aspect to their American existence than the slave trade.

And made sure his musicians knew this as well as they knew the tunes. It was all connected. And not just as an intellectual notion. He embodied his spiritual concepts and he expected his musicians to do so as well—and they did, continuing even after Sun Ra had passed into spirit!

Not only did the Arkestra play all the instruments normal to an aggregation of its size, but they also drummed and sang together. Often unison lines about traveling through space, and their earthly harmelodic mission. Sun Ra's mystique was augmented in his home by several candles from the botanica burning in long tubular glasses, Jericho roses in bowls of water, loadstone amulets, silver and golden bracelets and sequins against black, violet, sky blue and deep red fabrics that seemed to be made equally of silver, platinum and gems from other worlds.

This particular residence was on the second floor of a four-storey town-house of sorts off 2nd Avenue and 3rd Street in what now would be called the East Village. Back then, in the early sixties, it was simply the lower east side. Second Avenue was the “Broadway” of the old Yiddish theater district of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where on practically every street below 12th were still many appetizing delicatessens selling smoked whitefish, pickled tomatoes and the inevitable lox and cream cheese, not to mention the onion rolls, rye and pumpernickel loaves, whole and sliced to order.

And many tiny storefront eateries, featuring knishes, kasha, soups of beans and barley, and breakfasts at all times. With the candy stores featuring egg cream sodas, and halvah with its sweet sesame paste. From the entertainment world Jacob Jacobs, Molly Picon and other notable Jewish actors and comedians were legends on that avenue. Gershwin lived on 5th and 2nd Avenue and according to his best friend (lower east sider Yip Harburg), was the first in their coterie to get his own piano, so big it had to be elevated by riggers and slid in through the window. The old Anderson Yiddish theater, by then mostly unused, was just around the corner from Sun Ra’s place. One wondered why it was not possible for the Arkestra to have had that theater as its residence.

But the Arkestra was just beginning to break out in New York City. Within the emerging Black Arts Movement they would become co-conspirators of the new avant-garde free jazz, as well as interpreters of the classics of early jazz as played by Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, music from the Harlem renaissance. It was said that Sonny played for Henderson’s group. He did not seem old enough to have done so, but then again he seemed ageless, mythic (as he often termed his music) so that in the course of his invasion of New York it often felt as if anything and everything was possible.

Sun Ra had come from Chicago at some indefinite time in the early sixties, set his living quarters up, and began to gig everywhere he could, often setting up his own nights at various clubs, and even playing venues few others dared to tread like the Charles Theater on Avenue B and 12th Street.

He always had plenty of vinyl for sale, many with labels that referred to his own Saturn Records. These put his more conventional releases on ESP Records, *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volumes 1 & 2,* in perspective. I went with him once to where he pressed his own recordings, a warehouse in the south Bronx, where through a massive iron door a look-out peeked out and admitted the rather tubby Sun Ra into its mysterious interior. He emerged with glossy platters of newly pressed vinyl product, unlabeled but ready to be played.

Then there was his majestic pageantry, his glittering, cosmic stage clothes, wizard hats, and the singing and drumming musicians able to go back in jazz time, blaze through the present, or blast off into the outerspace of the future.

Around the house he was often referred to as Sonny. There was always a boyish air of discovery around him, one that merged with his deep beliefs regarding music's inherent spirituality, especially that form called jazz.

His numerology would give way to overviews on the condition of humanity, especially as concerned his charges, the long exiled Blacks of this new world, and within that, his specific mentorships with his loyal, highly flexible array of gifted musicians.

Sonny had read deeply into occult and magical literature, and he was connected with various practitioners in those realms. But he was stalwart in his dedication to the spirituality within the music and he made sure his musicians stayed mindful of that essential concept.

His ensemble of musicians resembled a group of African American Taoist monks, troubadour mystery religion initiates. Sonny himself seemed an aficionado of everything from Freemasonry to Hoodoo, although to my knowledge he never practised any particular system, preferring instead to invent his own, deeply rooted in the music of the cosmos. He possessed some books from little known African Americana, like *God Wills the Negro,* but his main focus was on a huge book of compositions, his own and favorites of others, including arrangements from the early days alongside some huge surprises, like when he did some concerts based on the music of Disney.

Sun Ra and his Arkestra would be featured every Monday at Slug's Saloon, a jazz club deep in the lower east side's Alphabet City, in the midst of all those five- and six-storey tenements that housed immigrants and poor people from all over New York, as well as surrounding states and nations near and far.

At one point it was said that the lower east side was one of the most crowded areas in the world. Most impressive was how poor people of all races, ethnic variation and background lived together with a minimum of conflict. I was surprised at the great number of Jewish friends of mine whose parents and grandparents had began in those neighborhoods, streets that seemed divided by the great concourse of East Houston Street, just below 1st Street, where Alphabet City ended and narrow, asymmetrical streets went down across the great expanse of Delancy Street, flowed into the Williamsburg Bridge, and continued to where Grand Street met East Broadway only blocks from the East River, as it began to taper the island down to its narrowest point, where Wall Street was the landmark of note.

Along that entire expanse of the lower east side below East Houston Street ambitious middle-income and more low-income high-rise housing developments began to compete with the tenement and occasional town-type houses. Slug's Saloon jazz club was in a double storefront on East 3rd Street between Avenues B and C. First Street ended at Avenue B, and Second Street ended at C, so there was a tapering effect going on, making 3rd Street more of a junction between the streets that began on the other side of East Houston Street. Avenue C was where the remnants of the Jewish peddlers, on horse-drawn or push carts, would roll up from their residences on the other side of Houston Street to line the entire length of Avenue C, all the way to 14th Street, with their wares: from fruit to nuts, hardware to clothing—all inexpensively priced to attract those local low-income consumers.

So 3rd Street was a significant place where, for some reason, the likes of Jackie McLean, Kenny Dorham, and others would live and play (and where Lee Morgan was shot dead one night while gigging at Slug's). C-Sharp lived up the street and Eric Dolphy had a loft on Cherry Street, several blocks below Houston Street, just above the East River. Sonny played for years every Monday night at Slug's, long sets that would go on for hours. It

would seem as if many in the audience would pass out, completely overwhelmed by the music. For the Arkestra to play in this extended fashion was the rule rather than the exception, and many who followed Sonny were used to it—indeed reveled in it. Here was a chance to be baptized by full immersion in the music—The New Black Music.

This Black Music concept was something Amiri Baraka, Archie Shepp and others had been talking up as part of the emergent Black consciousness concepts sweeping though the Black communities of artists, who were becoming more and more aligned with the civil rights movement whilst retaining their bohemianism. This recognition was not focused on the south, but acknowledged the cities, from New York to Boston, Philly to Chicago, Detroit to Kansas City, San Francisco to Los Angeles, as being equally central to the emergent Black consciousness movement.

And it was understood by Black artists that civil rights included artistic and cultural rights. The pronouncements of Malcolm X, who had emerged out of Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslims of Chicago to become a powerful reality uptown in New York City's Harlem, were not at all removed from Sun Ra who had emerged from Chicago as well to take residence in another ghetto, only this one in downtown New York City in a multicultural environment that included the Beat Generation, hippies, and a plethora of Black artists and writers as well as Puerto Rican writers and poets.

3rd Street between B and C would become the home of the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe, as led by Miguel Pinero, poet and playwright. Miguel Algarin, professor of literature, who specialized in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Bimbo Rivas, Lucky Cienfuegos and of course Pedro Pietri, whose image now graces the entrance to that citadel of Puerto Rican arts.

One block below on 2nd Street between B and C Black visual artists Joe Overstreet with Coreen Jennings would establish Kenkeleba House and the Wilmer Jennings Gallery, two showcases for all artists but with a special emphasis on African American artists within that tradition. Steve Cannon and John Farris now live on 3rd Street between C and D. Both are poets who lived their lives parallel to the music of that area. Farris, poet in residence and music chronicler of Nublu club on C, lives in the former squat Bullet Space with other multicultural artists.

Steve Cannon now runs A Gathering of the Tribes, a gallery, magazine and book publisher, and every year puts on the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival as part of the area's tribute to that pioneer of Black music. Parker lived for a significant part of his life on Avenue B between 9th and 10th Street, and as his wife Chan recalls: that was the only time they lived in a normal apartment, in a normal community, where their kids could go to school in the neighborhood and they could pick them up after school and walk back home through Tompkins Square Park,

Sun Ra's spiritual Black consciousness became foundational to new expressions in all the art forms. His poetry was as intense and inspiring to the poets as his music was to many of the local artists. Amiri Baraka was definitely inspired by Sun Ra in espousing Black Music in books and reviews; it got to the point where all the musical forms of the African Americans could be classified under Black Music, and Sun Ra could play all its forms, from bebop to R&B, from avant-garde energy music to the big band arrangements of the twenties, thirties and forties.

Sonny incorporated this spectrum of Black Music and supported Amiri Baraka, who—in the aftermath of the assassination of Malcolm X—left his identify as LeRoi Jones, East Village intellectual, Beat and New York School poet, and physically began the Black Arts movement with his move to Harlem in 1965. Sun Ra, artist Joe Overstreet and many of the Umbra poets were right there with him.

Sun Ra is on the cover of Baraka's recent book of jazz reminiscences, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music,* published by the University of California Press. Sun Ra stands on top of the stoop of the brown-stone that housed the Black Arts repertory theater (built by Joe Overstreet) while Amiri poses at the bottom.

Sun Ra and his Arkestra gave many performances on behalf of the Black Arts Repertory School but refused to live in Harlem, returning with Overstreet and others to their residences on the lower east side. Sun Ra's support for Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement was central to its success. That movement was what Sun Ra was all about and his dedication never wavered.

But he continued to live in the multicultural East Village, and like many other Black artists did not see his devotion to Black expression as a disavowal of his white followers, fans and friends. Sun Ra made sure it was understood that their support for him included an understanding of his Black consciousness.

Over those years I had become intrigued by an instrumental of Sonny's and a smaller ensemble on a Saturn Records release entitled *Love In Outerspace.* I wrote some lyrics for the tune and sang them while the record played and I taped my voice and the instrumental on a portable cassette player. "Sunrise and love everlasting . . . " When I played it for Sonny he was delighted. He insisted we record it in a studio, some walk-in joint in midtown. I forgot about it, especially when the prospect of moving to northern California became more and more of a reality.

Years later, after a period of being out of touch with Sonny and the Arkestra, I would discover Sonny had indeed liked the lyrics and had built a gigantic production number around it. Sonny begins on electric keyboard with his underlying refraining figure that holds the rhythm and keys the harmonies. A procession of musicians and dancers calling out their allegiance to outerspace flow from the stage and through the aisles, then a singing of the lyrics in choral arrangement, then a solo with Michael Ray singing the lyrics over full Arkestra accompaniment, then a slew of horn solos as prelude to Sonny's quintessential improvising on the beautiful, touching and evanescent melody—then back to the Arkestra in full relief.

But it would be Sonny's rendition for his major label debut for A&M Records that I would hear him sing the most beautiful version, probably alone in the studio, accompanying the tracks laid down in the Times Square studio earlier that year.

Sunrise!

And love everlasting

reaches out to a lover

like me again.

Sunrise

and love in its splendor

speaks to me
in metaphysical harmony.

We move
with love everlasting
ever upwards
to delight in the mysteries

Sunlight
and love, love, love everlasting
Sunrise
and love for the world to see

Sunrise in outerspace
love for every face
Sunrise in outerspace
love for every race
Sunrise in outerspace
love for every place
Sunrise in outerspace
love for every body
Sunrise in outerspace
Sunrise in outerspace
love for every body
Sunrise in outerspace
love for every body.

I was on the faculty of the African American Studies Department at UC Berkeley in 1971 when they extended an invitation to Sonny and the entire Arkestra to come out and be in residence. This would be their first major arrangement as a new emergent department in the new Ethnic Studies

conglomerate, something that had been fought for in words and violent demonstrations for years.

Ethnic Studies at Berkeley had been pretty much synonymous with the struggle over nearby People's Park, owned by the university but a favored piece of open public space which was also a sanctuary for many homeless who slept in sleeping bags under the old growth trees at the back of the park. The struggle for Ethnic Studies was eventually won; struggle over the park continued.

I was told Sun Ra had agreed to come with the Arkestra for the academic quarter and arrangements were made. As the day of his arrival grew close I was informed there seemed to be a problem that might prevent his coming. I called him up and we spoke for a short while. I said, "Hey Sonny, we are waiting for you and the guys to show up out here." He laughed and said they were on their way. Apparently he just wanted a word of assurance from someone he knew.

They arrived and it was wonderful. He was immediately embraced by the Black, alternative hippy and New Age communities. He was a sensation all over the place. While Duke Ellington would pass through, playing at the local grand hotel for a night, Sun Ra and Arkestra were here for an entire quarter—just about three months.

This residence caused a bit of a sensation among Berkeley's administration. The chancellor, Albert Bowker, a mathematician who had been head of City College in New York and was also a recent arrival, called Sun Ra a "phantom," and Sonny loved it, loved the high level commentary his presence caused. Although he was listed to teach a regular course as part of his Regents' Professorship, his classes were held off campus for the most part.

Besides, this was the first year for African American studies as a part of the new Ethnic Studies department, whose existence was the result of a hard "Third World Strike" that was initiated by the Black, Latino and Asian communities and supported by the students of Berkeley. After weeks of demonstrations, class boycotts and street fighting against police and state troopers, the administration gave way to the students, who argued their education was being adversely affected by the lack of diversity on campus

in the departments and programs; the Ethnic Studies program was quickly put in place. This was the first year of its operation. Just as with the Black Arts Movement, here was Sun Ra and his Arkestra at the forefront of yet another social movement.

Sun Ra extended his Northern California stay for several weeks. He was the toast of not only Berkeley but San Francisco, as well as all up and down the peninsula from San Jose to Santa Cruz.

The Divisadero, an art nouveau theater in the heart of the Fillmore section, was made available to Sonny. A filmmaker began shooting the film that after a couple of makeovers would emerge as the only film to capture the essence of the Arkestra: *Space Is the Place.* Sonny ranged even further north and south, playing LA and Mendocino County—they played all over California and loved it. They left California as conquering heroes with a few new members of the Arkestra.

After his return from California Sonny and the Arkestra seemed to grow in stature. Tommy Mims, a former ad exec, became their chief producer and coordinated more and more tours of Europe and Asia. Top shelf gigs. Mims also got Sonny and the Arkestra on NBC network's *Saturday Night Live* along with John Belushi and Gilda Radner and company, where the Arkestra played one extended number—uncharacteristic for that program but perfect for the Ra.

Afterwards, at a party for the show, a group of us sat at a table in the Rockefeller center skating rink that had been turned into a party set. Sonny looked up at the golden statue that dominated the entire side of the rink facing 5th Avenue. "Spokesmen for the whites say that's Prometheus, but they can't fool me. That's really Lucifer!" We all had a good laugh.

Sun Ra and the Arkestra did very well with Mims as their producer and manager of sorts. They traveled the world and made regular reappearances in California, having an ongoing relationship with an African American not-got-profit cultural organization out of Oakland.

At some point they established a residence, a house, in Philadelphia at 5626 Morton Street. Sonny, wordsmith that he was, emphasized the Moor in Morton as of special significance. There was a grocery store they ran that

I was always curious to witness. I longed to see Sonny behind the counter and at the cash register.

I recall a gig they had in Oakland at a space rented by a local cultural center in Jack London Square, on the Port of Oakland, that was in the process of development. The renown and exquisite Yoshi's Jazz Club would relocate there after the Ra had helped develop that location for top shelf contemporary jazz and avant-garde music.

That night they played to an appreciative, loyal audience that packed the place. Afterwards Sonny made a late night deal with a local motel and the Arkestra settled in for the night, which was actually early morning. I recall them feasting on fast food, a lot of deep fried stuff, and I noted in my mind that a diet of this nature was not a good thing. I had wished there had been a caterer or someone entrusted with a proper meal for the Arkestra. But as the accommodations had been a last minute thing, I supposed a good feed would have come after that consideration, had it been better planned by the organizers of that gig.

Some time later, after Sonny suffered a heart attack, I visited him at the hospital in Philly. He was in good spirits and did not seem so bad. It seemed more like a fluke than a real occurrence. I think that might have been the attitude since Sonny had prevailed at the same stellar level for so long. I think, in retrospect, it was a mistake to take that situation so lightly. I suppose no one, including this writer, wanted to think the situation was serious.

But as I understand it there was not enough time for Sonny to enjoy a proper recovery. The Arkestra had gigs and, due to their rather large number, survival necessitated getting back to business as soon as possible,

I saw the Arkestra with Sonny at keyboards at a Summer Stage gig in New York City's Central Park. Sonny was in a wheelchair and was barely able to acknowledge the many visitors. He did not play so well. It was clear he was very much below par.

From that point I knew, as I am sure did others, that Sonny was in serious shape. What could have been done is beyond me. He was such a self-contained leader that there was no one (to my thinking) who could effectively take charge. I heard that there were heat problems at Morton

Street. That very cold winter made it necessary for him to leave there. I heard, in an ever so second-hand way, that he had been returned to his family in Alabama. I have no idea of the truth of this and recognize, ever so late, that there should have been an organized committee to oversee his recovery.

One would think that the city of Philadelphia, Temple University, or Penn State or the University of Pennsylvania could have effectively intervened. But this is pure speculation and probably based on the false concept that the tremendous importance of Sun Ra and the Arkestra would have been recognized by the city or by the local institutions of higher education.

I think I may not want to know the actual facts of the situation because they point out the failure of friends, fans and institutions.

Sun Ra's passing into spirit resulted in a rapid elevation of his status to a very important cultural and artistic entity. But for many there was never any question as to Sun Ra's most absolute importance and stellar stature.

After what I saw as a period of adjustment the Arkestra came under the direction of Marshall Allen and soon began to blaze anew with more of an emphasis on brass and woodwinds. I recall there being no one on keyboards for several performances I witnessed. The Arkestra as led by Marshall soon regained the high level of performance the Ra himself would have fostered, and one would think that there was some kind of celestial intervention.

Just recently, the Arkestra appeared at the annual Visions Jazz Festival on the lower east side of Manhattan, that since the late nineties had become a steady presence for the furtherance of improvised free jazz through recognition of its long-time practitioners, especially those from the sixties and seventies.

A lovely added element was the celebration of Marshall Allen's eighty fifth birthday that coincided with the "Marshall Allen—A Lifetime of Recognition" award that he received before the extended concert in the absolute tradition of the Arkestra now under his "direction."

The concert began with a flourish of color, yellow sequins bright gold against yellow tunics, matching hats in contrasting blue and burgundy sequins, the brass and woodwinds in exuberant fanfare and the unity of the voicings soaring through the packed auditorium. The classic Sun Ra

declamation, “We are not from here. We are from out there— Space is the place,” followed by a cacophony of horns transforming into a choir. A highlight was Way Down Yonder In New Orleans as a tribute to the home town of jazz. The brass band processional sound was in full swing as they played that tune as if at a second-line celebration.

This is the warmth of the
True Black Cosmos
A song sung to abolish sorrow
Out where the comets
Trill and
Every nebula has a name in
Vibration

The birthstone is encircled
But
Two rings don't make
Shackles
Here I dream out
Our limitlessness
Transform these chains to tracks

A woman dancer and Knoel Scott who led the horn section performed lovely solo dances, swinging and acrobatic, swirling delights that made you remember that dance has never been far from the music of the Arkestra.

Twenty musicians filled the stage. Eleven horns, there was a harp player, a woman on tympanis, a violin (played by Billy Bang), two bass players

including local Jiunie Booth, and a few others not identified on the program that listed the musicians as follows:

Visions 14 Festival @ Abrons Arts Center June 10, 2009

Recognition: A Lifetime of Achievement: Marshall Allen

The Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of Marshall Allen.

Marshall Allen—as, EVI, f, cl, v	Farid Barron—p and org
Charles Davis—ts	Knoel Scott—as, v
Rey Scott—b	Danny Thompson—bs
Dave Davis—tb	Cecil Brooks —ts
Dave Hotep—g	Bill Davis—tb
Elson Nascimento—surdo	Wayne A. Smith, Jr.—dr
Yabya Abdul-Majid —ts	John Ore—b
Fred Adams—ts	Special Guest: Billy Bang—vn
Dick Griffin—tb	

Sonny was a strong presence on the Vision 14 Festival mid June scene.

A Sun Ra interview had played over local jazz station WKCR-FM just prior to the festival. I was surprised by the sound of Sonny's voice, classic in its low tenor. One of his remarks stuck in my head, just like back in the day:

"People have the right to make their own destiny."

Sonny always said it all. The same goes for this poem of his published in the *Umbra Anthology 1967-1968* edited by this author.

The Myth of Me

Kindness in a cruel world?
What price the glory!
What else is kindness but glory
In a cruel world?
Many words spoken and activated
Activated and spoken in many ways

Are priceless scenarios.
What more could they be than that?
Remote upon the scene
I find the time to realize
That what I find to be
I be and that is all I own —
The thought of the me I wish to be
For nothing else is half as real
As the myth of me.

—Sun Ra

WORD FROM SUN RA

by Amiri Baraka

I.
I got a Message from
Sun Ra
Sun Ra

We got a message

From Sun Ra

Sun Ra

Sun Ra

Sd “The World is in transition
Your world & your condition”
Sun Ra returned
& visited Philadelphia

Sd, “I left for a N.Y. minute

But I came back to hell ya.”

II.

Got a Message

A Message

From Sun Ra

From Sun Ra

& this what Sun Ra

“This world, your world,

    is in transition

  for Both the Living & The Dead

(Alto) So what did Sun Ra say

Sun Ra

Sun Ra

What did Sun Ra say

(Alto)

(Drum) Sun Ra Returned

    Hovered over Philly

Some thought he was the Mother Ship

But we knew he was being Hip

(Drum)
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra returned

Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra left a message,

& this is what
he sd

(Singers & Piano & Bass)
"I am nothing but a color
nothing but a name
nothing but a flash of daylight
nothing but an ex-slave
"It is the present that is running
& the past it never came
I am the missing future
& the vision that you claim

Sun Ra

(Dancer & Tpt)
Sun Ra returned to say,
"I went away to help you
if you only Seize the Day

(Reed & Alto)
Translation was necessary
Cause Sun Ra Speak in tongues
Jupiter language & like our own
Like dig the way its sound
"Hya dee/way do play/re died doo
& the frown put Giuliani/Caesar boy again
Re work inside you/modee the soul
& sun & nature, water like bebop
Sunshine. Ok, kill the dog & open up
The day!

(Tpt & drum)
Sun Ra

(Alto & tpt)
Sun Ra dig he
Swayin cross the stage

(Drum)
Sun Ra, Sun Ra
(Open scat style- All)
So the sky
Moving over
Where we all come from
Inside the world is Blackness
Everything is dark & sky
Blood is light & water
Breath is heat & sun
Sun Ra was before anything except
He was nothing as well
The pygmies
Wore Sun Ra tee shirts
But they looked like their skin
Little Red dudes was Black as Ptah before
Was Ra's 1st band, only Arkestra in all land
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Came back
Hung around left a message
On what we lack
Sun Ra Sun Ra came ba

III.

Was a message
Older than
The Hear
Was making language
Lay-up-in-the-tree language
Thumb language
Vowel language
Brain-getting-big-in-the-tree
lst to see
the Sky
language
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra returned
Left a message for the Diggers
Left a message for the
Worldly wise (for those with ears & eyes)
Left a message in his music
A message from the Sun
Sun he dug everything was here
Was every
There
Her hear

IV.

Can you hear the message
Left by Sun Ra for the Hip

"the world is everything
the world is every where
& whatever said or done
is just description of the there"

Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra returned

When we got to signifying
Once we leaped up off the ground
Like inside the electric brain
Van Allen Belt
So the Beast cd not pursue
Us there

(Solo)
Was Sun Ra Was Su Ra
At night at the Black Arts
School

Was Sun Ra Sun Ra
Left to say he gone
Returned to say Come On

(Solo)
"Oh, world, you backward
Look in the mirror
& read the Scripture right

Wake up Get up, like the Wailers sd
& look yrself in the Head

Was Sun Ra Was Sun Ra

(Ensemble)
"Everything the same thing
Not one God but one thing
Everything is the this
Everything is the same

'time & Place a moment
A moment just the same

"Here is there & there is here
& Gone is Come and Come is Gone

"All is Opposite its All is Opposite
One is two & two is One
& Everything is Nothing &
Everywhere is Nowhere
& Aint no Place & Aint no Space
& All me is was will & when
& what come will come again?
Was Sun Ra Is Sun Ra
Be Sun Ra from inside
Trembling light Earth to Saturn to Jupiter

"From Black to Ultra-Violet
To Indigo to Soulful Blue
Take me take me take me
Take us take yrself
Altogether
Green is Born
Yellow watch me Brown upon the earth

Atop a tree I paint the world
Like my heart- Oh Beat Beat
Oh Beat Be-At
Be-At
Sun Ra Sun Ra Sun Ra
Returned to say
“Feel me at night

See me in the Day?
Was Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Come Back

“When I caught a fire (was always on fire)
I came like a comet, was a Planet
Invisible cd sing in yr head
Then I turned Red
Was a Black Bird
Cd sing, was a Black Bird
With a flaming tale
Cd rap cross water
Beat a log like a sailor
Was a wave like a sea Was a crooked piece of sunlight A color was a name?
Was Sun Ra Was Su Ra
Was Sun Ra Returned
& Red was explosion
going home
from on a mission
Exploding Red through nine past Suns

Beyond Sun & myself Sun Ra Sun Ra

(All Voices, Ensemble, under that solos, Break dance, jagged sudden stop-go steps from all. Reeds hard, Band free, Some squat, Some leap, some scat, some play, some sing)

V.

Was Sun Ra, When he returned
Way go deep way off
Be sleep Go on
Wake Sun
Oh, Gone
Way it clear
Was Sun Ra Sun Ra
Sun Ra
When he returned

(Repeat . . . alto)

Why all they here without the rest
Of us the we
No one there
Without is
As love
Electric
Invisible
Under you
Under All
From ON
Rising Gone

Sun Ra return
Sd
“Everything aint a nigger
you already dead
Everything a slave master
You gon’ die instead

Sd Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Sun Ra
Return

(All solos-& break - raise each instrument)

I am Sun Ra
(All, each, speak)
I am Sun Ra
(Together)
We are Sun Ra
You are Sun Ra (2)
Nobody is Sun Ra (2)
The world is Sun Ra (2)

But aint seen no God We seen the Sun
Aint felt no God Have felt the Sun
Ha!, Aint no God!
But we know the Devil Real!

So the world
Sd, Sun Ra

VI.

Sun Ra
When he Return
so the world
In transition
& the mighty people
all the many colored niggers
like the hip of your body
like the flashes and funk of
your mind

So the many colored flashes of
Divinity - Sd Sun Ra Sd Sun Ra
When Sun Ra returned
“Divinity is Infinity
to tell the future is Divine
The world isn’t really matter
Independent of your mind.

“All you different colored Niggers
live & live and Rebuild
the dying World

“When the Dogs & Beasts are Dead
When they suicide the fools &
Kill themselves
When you have slain the ugly
Beast then
All you Niggers
Different shades and forms

& languages & figures
All you Niggers
Gonna live!”

That’s what Sun Ra
Thus spoke Sun Ra
So Sd Sun Ra
When Sun Ra Returned

& if you think we lying
then you about to get
burned.

(Finale)

Sd Sun Ra
Sd Sun Ra
Sd Sun Ra
When Sun Ra Returned

(Do Steps, sequence as before)

(Scream)

Sun Ra

Sd Sun Ra

Sd Sun RA

All you different kind of niggers gonna Live!”

—5/31/98
From Razor *by Amiri Baraka,*
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THEIR SPACE WAS MY PLACE

SUN RA AND MC5 AT THE GRANDE BALLROOM
Detroit, June 1969

by Ben Edmonds

WHEN SUN RA and his Myth-Science Arkestra descended from the skies in May of 1969 and took up temporary terrestrial residence in Ann Arbor, Michigan to play a series of local shows, many with MC5, your present chronicler was an aspiring writer living in the green and pleasant boondocks of central Ohio. I had met the Motor City 5 the previous December in the notorious Back Room of the New York City art bar Max's Kansas City, only weeks after the live recording of their debut album *Kick Out The Jams.* When I saw MC5 make an unannounced appearance at the Fillmore East on one of the free Wednesday night shows put on by the psychotic community-activist group the Up Against The Wall Motherfuckers (another story for another campfire, kids), my budding consciousness was completely demolished and then reassembled by their performance. They were a non-stop blur of action and aggro, visually stunning and instrumentally electrifying, deliciously primal and musically advanced, the gutter *and* the stars—everything I wanted a rock & roll band to be.

My high school poet pal Magic Terry—whose band Magic Terry and the Universe had been shepherded to Elektra Records by Danny Fields at around the time the young Elektra exec discovered MC5 and the Psychedelic Stooges— likened the Back Room of Max's to sitting "at the tables of the dream captains." The night I first encountered them, the members of MC5, their manager John Sinclair and spiritual agitator Jesse Crawford were sitting at the biggest table in the Back Room. But instead of basking in their imminent rocket ride out of the underground, or being the least bit awed by all the New York fabulousness surrounding them, the 5

and friends had instead rhapsodized at considerable tequila-fueled length about the “high energy” and “killer” rock & roll scene back home in Detroit. If this spectacular band was any indication of what was happening there, I had to know more.

They did not exaggerate. When I made it to Michigan shortly thereafter, the Motor City that had burned in urban insurrection while the west coast enjoyed its 1967 Summer of Love was, less than two years later, now ablaze with rock & roll. The nexus of the scene was the Grande Ballroom, still the greatest of the many hippie music emporiums this writer visited, but the saturation of local rock & roll culture was staggering. Every empty storefront, Knights of Columbus hall and church basement had suddenly become a rock club, all of them full of crazy midwestern kids finally let off the leash. There was also a surplus of groups clamoring for a place on these makeshift stages, making every night a battle of the bands. Down in the basement of Barry Kramer’s Mixed Media headshop, the first issue of a rock & roll paper called *Creem* was being prepared by a staff of miscreants I was soon to join.

During this time I was dealing amateur amounts of hashish to finance extended expeditions to soak up the Michigan scene. I often hitchhiked up US-23 to Ann Arbor, the college town fifty miles west of Detroit to which MC5 had relocated the previous year after police harassment had driven them out of the city. The band, John Sinclair and various White Panther Party dignitaries shared a large Victorian house at 1510 Hill Street. The rambling place next door at 1520 had been subdivided: one half housed another White Panther band called the Up (managed by John’s brother, the late great David Sinclair) and assorted roadies. The other half was rented to some college girls who did not appear terribly fond of the high-energy White Panther jams that bombarded them from all sides.

I arrived at Hill Street one afternoon in May to find Sun Ra and his Arkestra installed in the other side of the Up house, the college girls presumably having fled. There the Ra troupe would reside for the better part of a month while playing a string of shows culminating in their co-headlining appearance at the two-day Detroit Rock & Roll Revival at the Michigan State Fairgrounds. John Sinclair, who’d brought the Arkestra in and had a strong hand in programming the festival, liked to point out that

headliners Chuck Berry, MC5 and Sun Ra represented the past, present and future of the music.

I was already an enthusiastic convert to the Ra cosmology. The rock underground had not only proposed alternatives to the existing pop structures and embraced investigation of the music's sources, it welcomed expeditions to try and locate manifestations of the same spirit in the most far-flung places. So the underground rock sensibility was seasoned with blues and folk and R&B, but could also encompass ragas, the homemade music of Harry Partch, the hipster life lessons of Lord Buckley, and a universe of jazz possibilities. At the end of that universe waited Sun Ra.

The pimply-faced boho crowd I ran with in high school had eagerly devoured Monk and Mingus and Miles and Trane and Ornette, but Sun Ra was no more than a rumor. We tracked down obscure discs by Albert Ayler and Eric Dolphy, but distribution of records on Ra's El Saturn label didn't penetrate the western suburbs of Boston where we were temporarily imprisoned. We got the picture, or as much of it as vinyl could convey, when ESP-Disk unleashed two volumes of *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra* in 1965 and 1966. The fact that fringe-dwelling ESP represented a quantum leap in distribution should tell you how far out there El Saturn was operating. Decades later, when I was living in Los Angeles, I was granted an insight into their process. After Sun Ra had passed through town, a batch of El Saturn albums—some with individually colored covers and labels—showed up at Aron's, my neighborhood record store. This vinyl obviously served the utilitarian purpose of helping the Arkestra move from place to place, a merch concept any contemporary touring band will immediately understand.

The music, when we finally heard it, was puzzling, pulsating, mysterious, bewildering and intoxicating, an invitation issued as a challenge. As a toddler my favorite kiddie record had dramatized the strange and wonderful adventures that occurred after the hero fell into the bell of a saxophone, and Sun Ra's music reminded me of that. It was like being transported inside the instruments to a world barely hinted at by the conventional musician's use of them.

The picture was completed when I saw the Arkestra during their years-long Monday night residency at Slug's Saloon in New York City. The

costumes and space pageantry made perfect sense, an outward manifestation of the world Sun Ra's music brought you inside of. The cover of *Heliocentric Worlds, Volume 2* had depicted Sun Ra in the company of celestial thought giants Da Vinci, Copernicus, Pythagoras, Galileo and Tycho Brahe, a contention our blown teenage minds were in no state to dispute. We were willing alien abductees, only too happy to overlook the fraying of some of the costumes and the faint scent of snake-oil that occasionally lubricated his cosmo-Egyptoid flights of fancy.

Rolling Stone magazine had just introduced its readers to Sun Ra in a cover story the month before his Michigan sojourn, but the man from Saturn already had a longstanding relationship with the wing of the Detroit rock & roll community that had coalesced around John Sinclair and MC5. The 1967 Ra/MC5 concert at Wayne State University had become legendary despite having been sparsely attended, its immortality aided by one of poster artist Gary Grim-shaw's best early efforts. One of the things we loved most about MC5 was their embrace of the outer limits of jazz as a major component of what they termed "avant-rock." In the interest of purity and accuracy, however, we must correct the oft-repeated error that Starship from *Kick Out The Jams* was a Sun Ra song. The space-rock odyssey was composed by MC5 and incorporates the Ra poem There, published in Amiri Baraka's magazine *The Cricket* and used on the back cover of the *Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volume 2* album.

Though the musics of MC5 and Sun Ra's Arkestra actually had little in common beyond their shared commitment to going beyond, there were other points of connection. You'll have to convince me that the similarity in the titles of Sun Ra's Rocket Number 9 and MC5's ode to glue Rocket Reducer No. 62 is purely coincidental. The dual guitar crescendos of Wayne Kramer and Fred "Sonic" Smith that climaxed Rocket Reducer and closed the thunderous first side of *Kick Out The Jams* represented not only the rush of the glue-soaked rag (yet another story for another time, kids), it always felt to this listener like one of the Arkestra's massed liftoffs. The costumed superhero "Sonic Smith" that became Fred Smith's occasional stage alter-ego owed as much to Sun Ra as to the corrupting influence of comic books. And while there may have been little musical influence on the Michigan rock scene, there is also no doubt that the example of theatrical

transformation presented by Sun Ra emboldened many who witnessed it. You could see it in Iggy Pop's shattering of the wall between stage and audience, and hear a bit of it in the free-form stinkbomb thunderbolts hurled by his Stooges. And Detroit funk-rock fusioneer George Clinton, himself an alien from a weird planet called New Jersey, has never attempted to deny the mark of the Arkestra on his Parliament-Funkadelic "Mothership" extravaganzas of the seventies.

In my mind MC5 and Sun Ra were visionary brothers-in-musical-arms, fearless explorers charting unknown territory the rest of us might one day occupy. I would have traveled great distances to see either, so the announcement that the two would come together at the Grande Ballroom on May 17 and 18 [1969] could not be resisted. It was like an invitation to a summit meeting in another solar system.

When I checked in on Hill Street that auspicious weekend, the atmosphere had been radically altered by the presence of the Arkestra. MC5 house—which, unbeknownst to me, the 5 were making arrangements to leave—was the customary beehive of band and White Panther Party business. But next door at 1520, which was usually buzzing as well with Up and other assorted activity, the mood was hushed. People floated silently through the hallways that honeycombed the old Victorian, careful not to disturb Sun Ra's repose or contemplations. Though Ra no doubt appreciated the attention his music was receiving from the new rock establishment, he frowned upon drug-taking and what he perceived as an undisciplined, hedonistic lifestyle. He was a strict bandleader, the James Brown of outerspace, and he discouraged his charges from any unnecessary fraternization with their hippie hosts.

Musicians being irrepressible creatures, it wasn't long before Arkestra members began escaping this ascetic environment, slipping next door to enjoy clandestine tokes and beers, not to mention the tender ministrations of White Panther women. Jam sessions in MC5's rehearsal space often broke out. "As soon as Sun Ra fell asleep, his guys would climb out the window and sneak over," recalled Stooges guitarist Ron Asheton. "They were fun to party with, but when the jamming started these were great musicians blowing some serious shit. It was still a party, but the music was serious business. The 5 guys—especially Wayne [Kramer] and Dennis [Thompson]

and Fred [Smith]—loved it, and they could hang in there musically with the Sun Ra guys. The practice room was off the kitchen and they'd leave the door open. I was too intimidated to go in there and try to play. I just sat outside and smoked joints and listened to the great music coming out of the room. Those were some real magic moments."

Sun Ra himself stayed sequestered. "We never saw Sun Ra, except when he was leaving for a show or coming back," confirms Gary Rasmussen, bassist for the Up. "His musicians hung out a lot, though they weren't supposed to. They were definitely afraid that he'd find out what they were doing. I couldn't see the problem. They were chasing girls, taking drugs and playing music—just doing what we did every day. But I guess Sun Ra had a more religious view of it all, and he felt they should be like him. But they were crazy guys in their own way.

"The first place they played was the Canterbury House, this little club on Maynard in Ann Arbor," Rasmussen remembers. "To have *that* band doing *that* thing in this tiny space, you became part of it. You had no choice; you were *in* it. You have all these people, dancers and singers and musicians, leaving the stage and going out into the audience. It's almost like being in the band. Even now that music is not understood. Back then it was a real mind-blowing experience to find yourself right in the middle of it."

I can't recall if I attended the Saturday or Sunday night show, but the Grande was packed. (Friday night had paired Sun Ra with Led Zeppelin, moved over from a cancelled Olympia Stadium concert.) Sun Ra was the headliner according to the bill and Gary Grimshaw's postcard artwork, so I presumed the Arkestra would close the show. But while MC5 ceded the top spot to their guests as a sign of respect, "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space" (as they were called this time around) came on first. MC5 were then at the peak of their popularity, and the Grande was their home turf, the venue where they'd transformed themselves from house band to headliner. The order of performance made sense on another level. The 5's cresting local notoriety had swollen their audience with mainstream rock fans that had probably never heard of Sun Ra and were bound to be befuddled by their first exposure to his music. Putting the Arkestra on first ensured that they would be experienced by a full and effectively captive house.

An initiate couldn't have asked for better surroundings in which to experience a Sun Ra performance. The Grande Ballroom's best days were already well behind it when it first opened as an underground music venue in October 1966. By mid 69 the brief rock ballroom era was coming to a close as its culture exploded out of the underground and onto larger stages, and the building's owners undoubtedly saw this coming long before the audience did. There was no longer any pretense of "upkeep" to the already decrepit hall. But even on its last legs the old Moorish-style ballroom was capable of hosting magic carpet nights. This was one of them.

Though Sun Ra wouldn't have approved, I decided to commemorate the momentous occasion by ingesting some LSD-25. I suppose it was indicative of the innocence of those times, or God's boundless love for children and psychedelic fools, that my companions and I thought nothing of swallowing this powerful and possibly debilitating drug in the middle of a crumbling neighborhood in a potentially dangerous city we barely knew—and had a perfectly splendid time.

What remains now of the Arkestra's performance is a series of flashes only partially attributable to the drug. No two Sun Ra sets were ever the same, but there were certain elements common to all; you just never knew exactly how they'd manifest or the order in which they'd appear. You might have John Gilmore and Marshall Allen furiously debating with their saxophones, perhaps joined by Pat Patrick's sax and then other instruments, building to a collective improvisation that would rise and fall like a cosmic sea. There'd be a percussion onslaught that began modestly with a piece or two but kept growing until it was raining rhythm. There'd be singers and dancers, chanting invitations and invocations as they snaked their way through the audience. There'd be passages of exquisite ensemble dexterity, but also sudden squalls of solo keyboard by Sun Ra's piano, electric piano, organ, or whatever electronic thingamajig he was messing with at the time. Each of these elements was like a wormhole that would instantly deliver you to another sector of Sun Ra's seemingly infinite universe. The band's frequent hairpin musical turns were accomplished by a system of discreet hand signals from the leader. Because each member did so many things, it always felt like the Arkestra was larger than its actual (and constantly fluctuating) number, an advancing army of sound.

The most fascinating wormhole was the one that contained the music of the twenties and thirties. I can't tell you whether the couple of "oldies" in the Grande Ballroom set came from the songbooks of Fletcher Henderson, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington or Walt Disney—Ra was known to summon selections from these masters and many more. The abrupt switch from, say, a solo Moog fantasy to an expertly negotiated big band chart from another era was always thrilling, but especially so in the historic confines of the Grande, itself the ghost of another era. Built at the turn of the century and transformed from a nondescript dancehall into an opulent Moroccan-themed ballroom in the twenties, its large proscenium arch over the stage and band shell behind it were designed to project the music of orchestras like Sun Ra's in the days before rock & roll amplification. To appropriate John Sinclair's comment, *every* Arkestra set contained the past, present and future of the music, and the walls of this room opened up and welcomed all of it.

To hear a band of such obvious accomplishment suddenly combust into freeform cacophony always caused a couple of receptive minds to begin peeling back the layers of assumption surrounding terms like "noise" and "free." As expected, however, the majority of the audience didn't quite know *what* to make of this opening act spectacle. Technically Sun Ra was the middle act. Though Gary Grimshaw's card listed Cartoone as the opener, my vague memory is of the Dutch band Golden Earring on its first American tour. Their presence barely registered. They were promoting an album featuring a side-long arrangement of Eight Miles High, but we were aiming considerably higher.

During Sun Ra's set there was some of the usual cruising of the promenade that circled the dancefloor, but the presence of his music managed to disrupt much of the movement and chatter. My impression was of an endless stream of dancer/singers pouring off the stage and into the crowd, suggesting that the Arkestra could have recruited scores of auxiliary troops from the Hill Street irregulars. But considering the distance Ra chose to maintain, this was probably just the acid talking. The swirl of dancers chanting as they moved through the crowd—I can't tell you if it was "Space is the place!" or "What planet is this?" or "Next stop Mars!"—coupled with the ever-changing eruptions of sound coming from the stage seemed to

freeze much of the audience in place. Some of their silence was reverent, some was stunned and some stupefied. But even those who refused to suspend their disbelief would have to admit that Sun Ra had accomplished something remarkable. For the hour he commanded the stage, the familiar confines of the Grande became someplace else.

After a short intermission, and an introduction that was more an update of White Panther business than the customary rabble-rousing, MC5 sauntered on. This was slightly odd, as the 5 were known for exploding onto the stage. They led with the trifecta that opened their album—Ramblin' Rose, Kick Out The Jams and Come Together—but something was off. The band was then at the zenith of its power. Wayne Kramer may have been the most dynamic six-string stage performer of the rock era, and the combination of Kramer and Fred Smith was among the most potent guitar duos ever. Yet the group had been performing its album set for over a year and it sounded sluggish, as if their batteries were beginning to run down. The paint on Kramer's famous American flag guitar was chipped and showing obvious signs of wear, and that's how the 5 sounded. The rowdy crowd took no notice of the fact that it had more energy than the musicians. This might have remained a workmanlike show where a road-weary band is carried by the good will of a hometown audience. Then, somewhere midway through, during a lull in the feedback, another reality suddenly intruded.

"YOU SUCK"

The two words, delivered by a disgusted female voice somewhere on the perimeter of the ballroom, hung in the air like a patchouli fart. This was de cidedly *not* a fan imploring her heroes to do better, and the substance of her critique was not unknown to MC5. They'd recently returned from a disastrous west coast trip where their high energy assault had met with ridicule, razzber-ries, and worse. But this wasn't some low energy left coast be-in. This was the Grande Ballroom, the house MC5 built, and the one place in the world where they should have been safe from such slings and arrows. The White Panthers in attendance were outraged; they huffed and puffed and waved their fists righteously in the air, swearing to the gods of Zenta that the people's wrath would surely rain down upon this heretic.

Her judgment had been rendered loudly enough to reach the stage, and singer Rob Tyner stepped forward and addressed the heresy. “Well,” he sniffed, his Afro shaking with annoyance, “I think you been readin’ too mucha *Rollin Stone,* little darlin’.” He was referring to *Rolling Stone* magazine’s recent review of *Kick Out The Jams* which absolutely savaged the album and called the band’s musical competence into question. It was penned by a first-time reviewer named Lester Bangs, who’d later recant and list the album among his all-time favorites. Unfortunately, the damage was done. His scathing review in the “hip bible” was an embarrassment that had undoubtedly played a part in Elektra Records’ unprecedented decision to kick the troublemaking MC5 off the label even as their album was marching up the charts. More importantly it opened reactionary floodgates, so that January’s most talked-about new band in the business became May’s most derided “revolutionary hype.” The hugely unfair characterization of MC5 as inferior musicians stuck, and had now even violated the sanctity of the band’s stronghold.

Tyner’s rejoinder aroused only tepid approval from the crowd, most of whom didn’t get the *Rolling Stone* reference. But it appeared to kick-start the band, which tore back into the music with a vengeance. They hadn’t figured on having to defend their honor on their home turf, but they responded with some savagery of their own. Starting with a dagger-sharp version of Tutti Frutti, the remainder of their set burned with the kind of fire it possessed when it was newly forged. Bassist Michael Davis and drummer Dennis Thompson turned up the drive behind the front-court trio, and the five-man-machine crushed all resistance, real and imagined. Most MC5 shows concluded with the freeform “energy orgy” they called Black To Comm, but on this bill with the Arkestra they ended instead with their album-closer, the Sun Ra inspired Starship. It was easily the best version of the song I ever heard, and the only one I witnessed at the Grande Ballroom. These two facts are not unrelated.

If the music of the Arkestra was perfectly in tune with the historic acoustics of the Grande, then Starship illustrated the sonic advantage the ballroom provided MC5 in the age of amplification. “The Grande was a weird place, acoustically speaking,” Tyner explained to me shortly before his passing in 1991. “It had a circular feel, with a slightly domed ceiling,

and it would help big bands project this warm, dreamy, almost liquid sound. Add electronic amplifiers and it gets *very* strange. When we rehearsed in the empty ballroom with no people there to absorb the sound, you could hear it hit the back wall and roll like thunder. Very tricky, like rolling slapback, and if you didn't learn to deal with it your music would bounce off its own reverberation and become garbled. I saw it ambush a lot of bands from out of town, but we knew how to use it. On Black To Comm we could make that room ring like a bell, but the best example was Starship. It's the track on the album where you can really hear the Grande. All those strange sounds come as much from the atmospherics of the ballroom as from us. Starship is us playing the room."

As the final booster rockets of Starship rumbled to their climax and then flared out into darkness, the crowd could only muster muted, scattered applause. This indicated neither a lack of enthusiasm nor appreciation. The audience that stumbled out into the warm May night had been catapulted across the heavens and back again twice in a single evening, and simply had nothing left to give. Sun Ra and MC5 had taken us to vastly different parts of the musical galaxy, but when each delivered us to that place where "we can encompass vistas of the worlds" (to quote Sun Ra's poem), the new worlds we glimpsed were our own.

LIFE IS SPLENDID

SUN RA AND HIS SOLAR-MYTH ARKESTRA
Live at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival 1972

by John Sinclair

BY THE EARLY seventies Sun Ra and the Arkestra—now working under a variety of titles utilized by Ra to help define the specific function he had in mind for each musical permutation—were introduced to enthusiastic European audiences, although the US jazz establishment seemed forever to regard Ra and the Arkestra—under whatever guise—as some sort of freakish oddity unworthy of serious consideration.

But, seasoned by daily rehearsals and regular performances during their decade in New York City, at places like Slug's Saloon on the lower east side, the Arkestra was now fully skilled at bringing the composer's revolutionary musical concepts to vivid life before the public.

By the fall of 1972 Sun Ra and the Arkestra were operating at full strength. Now Ra was able to reveal the full extent of his compositional genius and utilize the Arkestra to unveil the cosmic philosophical underpinnings of his music, presented in a swirl of brightly colored costumes, leaping dancers, exotic percussion choirs and space vocal chorales, daring instrumental excursions and precisely executed ensemble passages.

This is the ensemble that met what was its largest American audience to date on Friday, September 8, 1972, the opening night of the first Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. Here Sun Ra and His Solar-Myth Arkestra took the stage following stellar performances by the Seigel-Schwall Blues Band, Detroit's Contemporary Jazz Quintet, Junior Walker and The All Stars, and the great Howlin' Wolf to close out the evening with a spectacular offering that thrilled the ecstatic crowd of some 12,000 music lovers.

Here at Otis Spann Memorial Field in Ann Arbor Ra unveiled his latest creation, the sensational *Space Is The Place* suite. The music unfolds with seamless clarity and brilliant logic from beginning to end, modulating from theme to theme and mood to mood without a moment's lapse of focus and moving the crowd to respond with unprecedented enthusiasm, so much so that we can hear a vast chorus of people gleefully chanting the composer's name for several minutes after the performance had ended.

This wholly unanticipated display of mass acclaim for the heretofore obscure bandleader and his wildly unorthodox Arkestra provided one of the highest points of my experience as a concert producer. The greatness of Sun Ra and his potential for reaching a greatly expanded audience of popular music lovers had been demonstrated beyond contradiction, and the visionary composer was well on his way to establishing his ensemble, in the words of Mark Steuve, as the Ellington Orchestra of the second half of the century.

The 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival was recorded in its entirety by Jimmie Douglass for Atlantic Records and co-produced by Douglass, Michael Cuscuna, and Tunc Erim under the supervision of Mark Meyerson. The original sixteen-track masters are presumed to have been destroyed in a warehouse fire, although several segments of the Arkestra's performance were mixed and edited by Alton Abraham and myself to produce a track titled Life Is Splendid for release on the Atlantic double-LP compilation of music from the 1972 Festival, released in 1973.

The music on this compact disc was digitally transferred and remastered from the two-track stereo masters recorded simultaneously with the sixteen-track masters as reference tapes. These tapes have been precariously preserved and lugged by the producer from residence to residence for more than a quarter of a century. Now they are finally finding the light of day through the release of this CD by Alive/Total Energy Records.

It gives me extreme pleasure beyond belief to present the astral music of Sun Ra and His Solar-Myth Arkestra in concert at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival on that lovely Friday night in September 1972. Tighten up your gravity belts and hold on tight—you're about to take a musical trip through the galaxies to worlds beyond, where *Life Is Splendid* and *Space Is The Place* indeed.

—Cleveland/Detroit/New Orleans
October 13-26,1999/
New Orleans
November 2, 1999/
Amsterdam
December 11, 2009

INTERVIEW WITH AMIRI BARAKA

by Lazaro Vega

Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 1999

AMIRI BARAKA IS ON THE PHONE from his home in Newark, conversing with Lazaro Vega of Blue Lake Public Radio. The conversation is in progress:

LAZARO VEGA: *Your poem to Sun Ra is interesting. When you're going on saying Sun Ra's name over and over it's as if you're trying to evoke everything about Sun Ra by just saying his name.*

AMIRI BARAKA: That's right, right. Well that's the Ancients. The ancient Africans thought that you say the name and the spirit will appear. That's what I was doing; I was trying to call his spirit up. And, well, I'm not going to speak on that any further because if I start saying I did then they want to lock me up. Sun Ra was a great to me. Really, all these people leaving out the world suddenly and together is very disconcerting.

Sun *Ra was the epitome of big band tradition.*

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. He was just in tune with the space age, that's all. He definitely was a traditionalist. I think in his last years he played a lot more of traditional big band music—in his own inimitable way, but still.

I heard him play Queer Notions by Fletcher Henderson.

Oh yeah, well he used to be Fletcher Henderson's back-up pianist. That's how old Sun Ra is. Sun Ra's older than dirt, man. So when he says he played with Fletcher Henderson then you know how old he was. He was an old guy.

That book that just came out by John Szwed is a very enlightening book if you're interested. Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra *it's*

called.

I think there are two books out on Sun Ra now. One from a guy in Germany, Art LeBrechts I think his name is, and then the one by Szwed who's at, where is he, Harvard or Yale, one of those places?

But it is good to see that there is some kind of more incisive and analytical criticism and analysis of the work. Rather than, 'I like it, I don't like it' Or the 'gee-whiz' brand of criticism, you know.

Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman came on the scene at a time when music reached a point where anything was possible.

Well, you see, the problem with American music is that the most inventive and creative aspect of it is always the most oppressed, and so it never gets to be as ubiquitous, say, as Kenny G. It's never heard as much.

In the real world Duke Ellington has set the tone for American music for a long, long time—fifty years, anyway. Too often our young players don't have the benefit of understanding that, or knowing that. Many do. But if you'll check somebody like Sun Ra, you'll hear a lot of his solos come directly out of Duke, [especially] a lot of those band pieces.

A lot of these people, like Monk, are coming straight out of Duke Ellington.

To the extent we can appreciate Duke Ellington we can certainly appreciate all of the kind of vectors from his gigantic body of works.

See, that's the point. When I say great people in anything, it means therere some people that it's impossible for you to ignore. In other words, it's impossible for you to ignore Duke Ellington and really be in the twentieth century. You might be walking around talking about, Oh, I like Monk! I like Monk!' But if you dig Monk, you'll find Monk is Duke Ellington.

So it's a question of how do we absorb the resources of our culture? In America it's funny because a lot of people don't even understand that their culture is African, European and Native. You know what I mean? It's broader than the establishment would have it be, obviously. To really absorb it you have to understand that you are all of it. And a lot of people

don't because of racism, or people are not well educated, don't know much about the world. This is defiantly a culture that's deep and rich, and richer and deeper than people even understand.

If you have Africa and Latin America and Europe to draw on, I mean effortlessly, as your psychological and historical kind of cultural development and you don't know that, well, then you'll settle for Kenny G. *[Laughs.]* You'll settle for something you don't have to, I'll tell you.

Or you just won't do the work to find out what's underneath that.

That's right, because it's deep; it's very deep. But look here, I'm going to have to run, I'm sorry, but I've got to get out of here right now.

From www.allaboutjazz.com/iviews/abaraka.htm

WORD FROM SUN RA

"You on the Space Ship Earth
& you outward bound
destination unknown.
But you haven't met the Captain
Of the space ship yet!"

Like the Dr. sd, suppose you actually believed
In God—but you don't . . . aint no reason to, mammy jammy
Don't exist—but suppose you actually believed
And therefore didn't understand that aint nobody
At the controls of this number . . . and them suckers
With the guns, is fighting to see who gonna be in charge
Of the crash!"

If you was Shine, you would laugh
Cause you remember the real Titanic
And how them drowning ghosts

Was screaming your name
As you predicted Michael Jordan
With your Thelonius back stroke
From the Antarctic to Harlem River Drive.

But if you aint Shine, and don't understand
That this space ship is a disaster gonna waste
Almost everybody in the sky sea and land

What can I say, and if I did say something
What wd it sound like to you and the ghost
And the deeply ill this explosion will kill
Say this, to answer that. . . Aint much time
And Shine done sang his song. But you got
Any Sun Ra records or DuBois books?

Otherwise
You gon die
With the murderers
& crooks.

“I KNOW EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MUSIC”

A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL RAY

by John Sinclair

I FIRST HEARD MICHAEL RAY in 1978 at the Ann Arbor Jazz Festival at the University of Michigan, shortly after he’d joined Sun Ra and His Arkestra, and I’ve heard and seen him in performance, on record and in person many times since.

Two years later Michael visited the Detroit Jazz Center with the Sun Ra Arkestra for a week-long residency between Christmas and New Year’s Eve 1980 where they performed eleven concerts and met with local players in a workshop setting. Later in the eighties Michael spent a year in the Motor City and was featured with a fine band called the Sun Messengers.

Since we’ve both relocated to New Orleans, I’ve spent time as a guest in Michael’s home, performed with the Cosmic Krewe on several occasions, written material for their presentations, contributed liner notes to their CD for Evidence Records—it’s no secret that I’m definitely a partisan, a participant, a part of the Cosmic Krewe community.

One night in September [1994] I sat down with Michael Ray on the patio of the place on Religious Street he shares with producer/cultural activist Gloria Powers. We were joined by their collaborator and partner in *Rhythm & Muse,* neon artist Jerry Therio, who sat back and listened and smiled while I interviewed Mike for this story in *OffBeat.*

JOHN SINCLAIR: *Mike, I want to rake you back over the coals of the past and find out about your development as a trumpet player and composer. Why don’t you take me back to when you started playing?*

MICHAEL RAY: I actually started in elementary school, but I used to put my horn down all summer to go out and play sports. I didn't get serious about music until I got in my first group called the VSQ's—it stands for "Very Special Quality" *[laughs]* and it was a funk band that played all of James Brown's stuff.

This was in the early seventies. And then I played all over New Jersey, moved to Philadelphia and worked in the studio band at Sigma Sound Studios. They backed up all the R&B vocal groups on Philly International Records and all the Thom Bell productions—Fat Larry's Band, the Stylistics, the Delfonics, Teddy Pendergrass, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes.

I guess you can say I became embroiled in the studio sessions in Philly. There was this pool of musicians that Thom Bell had under his fingers, so we did a lot of sessions. I played some dates with a group called Instant Funk, and some with a group called Big Bone, which was a twenty one piece band out of Philly led by a trombone player by the name of John Mennis. We had the opportunity to play at a festival, and Sun Ra was the headliner.

That's the first time I met Sun Ra. He had dancers running around, a couple of trumpet players, a suitcase full of music for the brass section. I got a chance to talk to one of the trumpet players, and then I saw Sun Ra on a trolley about two weeks later.

Sun Ra always looked kind of strange, because he would have, like, three hats on, headphones, multi-colored pants, sandals on. So he said, "Why don't you come over and rehearse—I'm getting ready to go to Egypt."

So I said, "I got too many sessions now, blah blah blah," and he left for Egypt and left me in Philly. I really wish I had gone. About a month later I saw him again and he asked me to come over and rehearse again, so I said "Ok, I'll be over."

Man, I got to the cat's crib and I was amazed with all the stuff in the house—all this Egyptian art, stacks and stacks of music, and all kinds of keyboards. And he's sitting in the middle of the room saying, "I know everything you need to know about music."

I said, “Yeah, right.” He said, “Do you know any standards?” I said, “Yeah, I know a couple.”

He said, “Do you know Lady Bird? Half Nelson? Ok, we’ll play it in ¾ time. Ok, now we’ll play it in 6/8 time. Ok, now you play Lady Bird and I’ll play Half Nelson"—because they were on the same changes, right? So when Sun Ra played Over The Rainbow on acoustic piano, that convinced me that he was a master musician.

It was a strange concept of rehearsing, just the way he would go over songs, and we rehearsed for three days, went to New York with about twelve pieces, and there was about twenty other cats from New York that showed up for the gig, you know—Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, Leon Thomas, all of these cats I didn’t even know.

This was around 1978, right? Who was with the band then?

We had Danny Davis, Marshall Allen, John Gilmore of course, Ahmed Abdullah, Ahktal Ebah, Pat Patrick, Charles Davis, Atakatun, just a lot of cats, man.

That was the first gig I played with Sun Ra, and then a week later he said, “Hey, we’re getting’ ready to go to Chicago. What you doing?”

I said, “I’m not doing nothing, Sonny.” So we went to Chicago and played the Jazz Showcase (when it was on Rush Street), and I couldn’t make the last date. I said, “Sonny, I got a gig at the Academy of Music in Philly. Can I get my bread?”

He said, “Yeah, OK. Tie my shoe.” So I got down there and tied my man’s shoe, just waiting for my money—which was something that you got used to on the Arkestra.

So I’m waiting outside the club, and he crosses the street. I cross the street. He crosses the street back, so right around there I was getting ready to say “Fuck it.” But he paid me—gave me an extra $100 and a plane ticket.

The next thing, he called me and said, “Hey, what you doing? I’m in Milan, Italy.” I say, “What you doing?” He says, “Come on over, I’m doing a session.”

So I went over there—this was still 1978—and it was just myself and John Gilmore, Luqman Ali on drums and Sun Ra. We did a quartet

recording that came out on about three LPs, and then we hung out in Milan for about a month.

That's where I really began to pay my dues with Sun Ra, because I'd be rehearsing with him and John Gilmore for about twelve hours a day. Ali had gone back to New York, so it was just the three of us. We'd wake up about nine o'clock, get to the studio about 12:00, rehearse until about 6:00, take a break and then go back until about midnight. Every day.

Sun Ra would say, "You're playing your music right, but you must have some kind of mental problem because you are not playing the music the way it's supposed to be played. Now look at this apple. Now play that apple —it's red and it's round, so you have to use 360° degrees of your other mind. It's your spirit I'm concerned about."

I'd play a couple of notes. "No, that's all wrong." So I really paid some dues with Sun Ra, every day for a month. But there was always something about his concept that was right on time. It's like he said, "I want you to keep this key right here with you at all times," and I just took it as some sort of a joke. But he was definitely for real.

He always had a different way of trying to handle stuff, different situations that would come up. Sometimes we would go through borders and he would say, "I want everyone to have 134 in your pocket, because if everyone has 134 in their pocket then we are a unified force and they won't mess with us."

I just thought it was bizzare, but Gilmore always said, "No matter how strange it sounds, if you follow that code things will work out." So the code of Sun Ra has always been just discipline, even if it was just a musical discipline: to learn your solo, be able to transpose, be able to sight-read, all of that stuff is mandatory to being in the Arkestra.

See, a lot of people listen to Sun Ra's music and figure it's all avant-garde and free, but most of his stuff is written up. He will transcribe a Fletcher Henderson solo and then orchestrate it for a sax section.

The cat was always writing, so we always had new music to play all the time. We really never played the real music in concert—Sun Ra had so much stuff that we would rehearse but didn't even play live, because he'd

say, “I’m just putting this out for people to steal stuff from,” and he’d keep a lot of it from even being played in public at all. Suitcases full.

We played Fletcher’s entire book, Duke’s book, Basie’s book, then we got stuck on even Walt Disney’s stuff, Cole Porter, all kinds of cats. We’d go through the whole book, the entire book, obscure songs you never heard about. See, Sun Ra covered every spectrum of music, so you really didn’t have to look any further.

So how did you get with Kool and the Gang? How did this relate to when you went with Sun Ra?

Well, I was working with Sun Ra and we did a New Music Festival at Carnegie Hall which was a sold-out event. The strangest thing about this gig was that they had nine dogs on stage and about a twenty-piece vocal choir, and they would stop and cue the dogs, and the dogs would howl and hit this chord— it was the strangest gig.

I had done some sessions with Kool and the Gang in Philly just before that, so when it came time to get paid we were hanging around—myself and the drummer, Craig Haynes—and Sun Ra told us, “Y’all gone have to move to Philly to get paid.”

By this time I was living in Jamaica, Queens, so I said, “Well, shit, I know where I can go and get some money,” so I went to Kool and the Gang, got my $400 for the sessions, and flew to LA with Kool. Oh, it was strange. And then I left Kool to go back with Sun Ra.

Did you go back and forth for a period of time?

Back and forth. One time with Sun Ra we went to Frankfort [Kentucky], flew to London, flew to New York, and caught a train from New York to New Orleans for the Jazz Fest, a thirty two hour ride. So I go to that gig and Kool was down here and we hung out and started talking and I went back with him.

So it was back and forth. I always considered myself an intergalactic tone research scientist for the Arkestra, because Sun Ra would just call me and say, “Hey, what you doing?” He would send me a ticket and I would be

there, and that went on since 1978. It was a blessing just to have that opportunity to play with this cat.

Did you ever reside at the Sun Ra house on Morton Street in Philadelphia?

Oh, yeah, off and on over quite a few years. There was a point when I was living in New York and I would come for a three-day rehearsal, which would be non-stop. But staying in Philly, it's like that every day.

When I had my knee injury I was still staying there, with those knee braces on, living on the third floor. And Sun Ra, you know, he was in his wheelchair, and he had hooked up some intercom system that he used to call the band members.

So one morning I hear Sun Ra calling me on the intercom, and he's calling [Jac] Jackson at the same time. "Michael? Jackson?" So Jackson is not responding, and Sonny is saying, "Michael? Jackson? Michael? Michael? Jackson?" So I got to get up, with my bad knee, and go down—it's like six in the morning.

I said, "What is it, Sonny?" "You got a visitor." So I go to the door, but there's nobody at the door, and I say, "Ain't nobody there." "No, I'm talking about there is a fly here. There is a fly flying around. You better call Fred."

So I called Fred, the other trumpet player in the band, and I get him on the phone. Sonny said, "Hand me the phone, hand me the phone! Fred, Mike's up, might as well start rehearsing. You better come over." He hangs the phone up and says, "What's for breakfast?" He had a way of getting you up.

So then Jackson gets up and says, "Hey, man, I had a strange dream about all of this Egyptian stuff . . . and Michael Jackson." *[Laughs.]*

I've always imagined that inside the Sun Ra mansion in Philly it was probably an entirely different world than that to which most Americans are exposed.

That's for sure! He had one room that he would call the Chaos Room, which you couldn't even see the floor it was so much stuff—suitcases, manuscripts, tapes by the crate. He would say, "This is where I hide some

of my treasures." You look under the bed there, you might find Keys to the City, some proclamations for Sun Ra Day, all kinds of strange things.

So how did you develop your role in the Arkestra as an intergalactic tone specialist? It was a pretty spectacular role that hadn't been there before.

That's something that Sun Ra gave me. He always taught me to act with a sense of urgency and utilize alacrity. He would say, "What makes you so special, when most musicians are a dime a dozen? You have to be able to do the unduplicatable or you will be replaced by a button." He'd say, "You know it's over eleven billion people on the planet—are you at the end of the line?"

I know you recorded an incredible amount of music with Sun Ra. What were some of the highlights for you?

One was from a session in Milano, Italy for Black Saint Records called *Mayan Temples*. It was just a magical session, and the last day Sonny said, "I'm hungry. Mike, you mix it." So they split, and Ahmed Abdullah and myself put a nice mix on it.

Another one was—we used to record at Variety Art Studios in New York City, on 42 nd Street, and we must of had a six- or seven album session, and I got a chance to mix that. Sun Ra was there in the engineer room, and he fell asleep. We set the board. "How does that sound?" He'd wake up, say "Sounds horrible" and go back to sleep.

We did something for Philly Jazz—they had a real good cosmic concept, they even had a pyramid over the mixing board. It was just some strange, strange stuff. And then we did a session in Paris with Sun Ra on synthesizer, Marshall Allen on oboe, and John Gilmore on clarinet.

He was always recording. I had a chance to go to six continents with the cat. Most of the memorable stuff has always been in Europe. We'd go to Europe and play to 10,000 people, then come back to the states and might have a hundred.

Let me ask you a couple of things about Kool and the Gang. What were the recording signposts when you were with them?

Well, most of the stuff started with Deodato—he was our producer when we were at the House of Music Studio in East Orange, NJ. Deodato always maintained an equation for recording—I learned a lot of stuff from him on how to stack a track and just how stuff is supposed to sound. He was one of the greatest producers for Kool and the Gang, and we did things like Celebration, Too Hot, Ladies Night, Jones Vs. Jones, Joanna. Mostly all their hits back in the eighties were produced by Deodato.

When did you finally cut Kool and the Gang loose?

Things started to get strange. We had started a tour in Canada, and Sun Ra was getting ready to do a session for A&M records, so Gloria made me leave Kool and the Gang and go fly to New York so I could be on this session, which came out as *Purple Night.* While I was in New York Kool and the Gang was scheduled to go to Europe, but the sheriff came and got them for a past-due bill on some cartage to Africa, and they couldn't send me a ticket. Man, I'm in New York stranded, what's a guy to do? So I stayed with Sun Ra.

—New Orleans
September 1994

Special thanks to Penny Sinclair for her transcription of this interview

ARKESTRA IN RESIDENCE

SUN RA & HIS ARKESTRA AT THE DETROIT JAZZ CENTER
December 26-31, 1980

by Rick Steiger

MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO SUN RA was at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. I was sixteen years old and the music left no lasting impression on me. But during the ensuing year, I developed an interest in jazz and began playing the saxophone. By the time the Arkestra returned to the Festival in 1973, I had become a Sun Ra "devotee."

Throughout the rest of the seventies, I followed the group to performances in Chicago, New York, Toronto, Cleveland, Dayton, Ann Arbor and East Lansing. And with a small amount of money in hand, I decided to look into bringing Ra back for a concert in my hometown, Detroit.

My initial dealings were with Spencer Weston, the group's production consultant at the time. I actually nailed a date—Friday October 24, 1980, at the Recital Hall of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The Arkestra hadn't been in Motown for a couple of years and the show was such a huge draw that I was accused of deliberately overselling it because of all the people who showed up and had to be turned away. There was no question I needed to talk with Ra about coming back.

By then, I'd already been working with my own group—appropriately named the Sun Messengers—for two years. We enjoyed a weekly gig at the Detroit Jazz Center, an intimate concert venue run by poet, activist and longtime Ra associate, John Sinclair.

The Center would be the perfect spot for an Arkestra performance and plans fell into place for a concert slated only two months later.

To date, I'm not really sure how the idea for a single date evolved into the six-day, eleven-performance residency that rocked the Detroit Jazz Center from the day after Christmas through New Year's Eve in 1980. I made several phone calls to Ra's home in Philadelphia to work out the details.

Ra said he wanted it to be the greatest cultural event going on in America at that time. We agreed it should be a multi-media presentation, complete with his personal poetry and artwork, a slide show of photographs and Jim Newman's film, *Space Is the Place.* There would also be lectures and question-and-answer sessions with his fans.

What I couldn't nail him down on though was the money. He never seemed to want to discuss the particulars—that is, until he'd been in Detroit for several days. I was summoned to his room so he could tell me he needed more cash. He made a mild threat to pull out his voodoo scepter if I didn't give him some. With an abrupt shift in emphasis, he told me I was handling things too much from a cultural plane and not a business one. Throughout the whole conversation I was amused to see "The Living Myth" sewing the band's costumes with a needle and thread.

The fifteen members of Ra's group arrived in Detroit on December 26. They'd made the trip from Philadelphia in a caravan of cars that included the little AMC Hornet of percussionist Bright Moment and a Cadillac driven by Danny Thompson. Their accommodations were rented beds in a dorm-style room on one of the upper floors of the building that housed the Jazz Center, though Ra had his own room.

Throughout the six-day series, the personnel of the band constantly shifted as the core group was augmented by Detroit-based alumni Tani Tabbal, Ali Mora, Jaribu Shahid and Reginald (Shoo-Be-Doo) Fields. The "Bell Brothers" drove in from the east coast and John Ore flew in from New York for the last day or two. Several dancers, mostly from Detroit's African dance community, also showed up to strut their stuff to Watusa.

It was a heady and exhausting experience for me. I thrilled to the small, personal moments such as taking Ra to visit his "auntie" who lived on the east side of Detroit. The day after our visit, she came to the show and Ra sang St Louis Blues to her.

I'll also never forget driving Ra around town while he was transcribing a Fletcher Henderson arrangement off a cassette tape with the help of a melodi-ca. And the fact that I was able to arrange for Ra to receive an honorary Key to the City seemed to put an additional stamp of approval on the whole thing.

Despite its success, this was the last time I promoted a Sun Ra concert. Yet its memory lingered on whenever I saw one of the many posters I'd put up along Detroit's Woodward Avenue. Though trumpeting just one small moment in time, they hung on the storefronts of long-abandoned buildings, untouched for a couple of years until urban renewal swept them away. A few of those posters and the recordings are all that remain of one of "the greatest cultural events" of that time.

SUN RA MEMORIES

by John Sinclair

MY FIRST REAL EXPOSURE to the music and legend of Sun Ra came in the fall of 1964, when drummer Roger Blank passed through Detroit with a jazz trio I can't remember the name of.

We put him up for a few days in our stronghold at the Detroit Artists Workshop Cooperative Housing Project, and I watched Roger open his suitcase and pull out what were obviously his most prized possessions: two weird LPs on the El Saturn label with garish outerspace art on the covers and names like *Super-Sonic Jazz* and *Jazz in Silhouette.*

I had read about the avant-garde Chicago pianist and bandleader in *Down-Beat* and other jazz magazines, but his music was still so far underground that few people outside the band's immediate orbit had ever heard it.

By this time the apocryphal *Jazz by Sun Ra* album on Transition Records was long out of print, and only *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* (Savoy, 1961) was currently available.

I knew the Arkestra had moved to New York City and taken the creative music community by storm, but its music was still pretty much only a thing of legend and not something you could put on your turntable and listen to at will.

Blank regaled us with tales of Sun Ra and his fantastic Arkestra—how they all lived together in a tiny apartment at 48 E. 3rd Street on the lower east side of New York City, where at least a dozen grown men crammed into a three-room pad and rose each day for the mandatory noon rehearsal.

They might go for months without an actual gig, working religiously on mastering the uniquely imaginative compositions and arrangements created for them by their leader with no hope of more than a musical reward.

By 1964 Sun Ra and his long-time partner in Chicago, Alton Abraham, had launched their own label, El Saturn Records, but the fledgling company seemed to distribute its products strictly on a hand-to-hand basis.

Seeing two of them now, popping out of Roger Blank's suitcase in Detroit, sent thrills coursing throughout my being—they were so rare it was like the answer to a prayer.

Soon Sun Ra would release two startling albums—*The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volumes 1 & 2*—on the new avant-garde jazz label ESP-Disk, which finally brought his music to the attention of the jazz world at large.

On a trip to New York City in the fall of 1966 after I'd been released from a six-month prison sentence at the Detroit House of Correction, I made a pilgrimage to 48 E. 3rd and spent some time with Sun Ra and the Arkestra, even managing to interview the enigmatic composer for our underground paper in Detroit, the *Warren-Forest Sun.*

One evening I showed up at the pad with my tiny Opel sedan just in time to serve as the major transport for the Arkestra's gig that night at the Jazz Arts Society of New Jersey in Newark, where they ended up playing for just about as many people as were in the band—about fifteen.

In the spring of 1967 I arranged for the Arkestra to make its first Detroit appearance at the Community Arts Auditorium on the Wayne State University campus, a 600-seat venue. They shared the bill with MC5 and the Magic Veil Light Show and played to maybe 100 people.

The gate receipts were so miniscule that one of the members of our Detroit commune, Emil Bacilla, ended up driving the Arkestra back to New York City in his Volkswagen bus because we were unable to pay the band's transportation costs.

During my tenure (1967-69) as manager of MC5, I shared with the band my unbridled enthusiasm for Sun Ra's musical message and his cosmic space philosophy. In 1968 MC5 developed a piece called Starship, a wild space odyssey in the amplified-guitar-and-rock-drums idiom into which the singer Rob Tyner incorporated Sun Ra's poem, "There / is a place / where the sun shines / eternally . . . "

Starship made it onto the 5's first album for Elektra Records, with Sun Ra sharing composer's credit with MC5.

In the spring of 1969 I arranged for Sun Ra and the Arkestra to come out to Michigan for a month-long residency. We rented the house next door to our commune at 1510 Hill Street in Ann Arbor for them and presented the Arkestra in concert with MC5 at several area venues, including Detroit's Grande Ballroom, the Ann Arbor Armory, and as headliners at the First Detroit Rock & Roll Revival festival at the Michigan State Fairgrounds, where they headlined with Chuck Berry and MC5 in a bill designed to showcase the past, present and future of the music.

When I had the opportunity to select the artists for the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, I scheduled Sun Ra and the Arkestra to close the first night's show, following performances by the Seigel-Schwall Blues Band, the Contemporary Jazz Quintet (CJQ), Junior Walker and the All-Stars and How-lin' Wolf.

Sun Ra completely wowed the crowd of 12,000 with the Arkestra's spectacular presentation of space age improvisational music, brilliant costumery and frenzied choreography. On the Atlantic Records 1972 Festival album, the audience can be heard chanting *"Sun Ra! Sun Ra! Sun Ra!"* for several minutes following the end of the Arkestra's performance.

Sun Ra's 1973 appearance was more highly anticipated than ever before. Now he was incorporating his philosophical disquisitions into the stage show itself, casting his views into verse and presenting them via a three-part vocal chorale to stunning effect.

A new suite based on the previous year's smash success, *Space Is the Place,* had been prepared to introduce Ra's concept of an "Outer Space Employment Agency" which would put the idled workers of post-industrial America back into a productive mode outside the tired orbit of Earth.

The Arkestra was again a big hit at the 1973 Festival, and they were scheduled to return for the 1974 event when hassles with the Ann Arbor city government impelled us to move the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival to Windsor, Ontario, just across the river from downtown Detroit.

I was trying to shepherd the Arkestra through Canadian customs when I was singled out and deported back to Detroit on the basis of a marijuana

conviction ten years previously.

I went back to my room in the Shelby Hotel and watched myself talking to a television news reporter covering my deportation proceedings.

This experience marked a major turning point in my life when I considered that the farthest-out group of characters I had ever seen in America was allowed entry to Canada, while I was turned back as "too far out."

"You've gone too far," I said to myself. "It's time to turn back now."

That fall I retired from political activism and the rock & roll scene to take up less grueling pursuits, working as an alternative journalist and editor for a couple of years and then opening a small community arts consulting business focused on providing program development and grant-writing services to indigenous jazz artists and organizations.

This led to the establishment of the Detroit Jazz Center in 1979, and by the end of 1980 the Jazz Center was presented with the opportunity to bring in Sun Ra and the Omniverse Jet-Set Arkestra for a week-long residency in downtown Detroit.

Rick Steiger, an aspiring young saxophonist and bandleader (Kuumba, the Sun Messengers, the Sun Sounds Orchestra) from the east side and a regular participant in the Jazz Center's various activities, came to me with an attractive proposal: he had just inherited a couple of thousand dollars from a dearly departed relative, and he wanted to use this windfall to finance a trip to the Motor City by Sun Ra and the Arkestra.

He would engage the band for the week between Christmas and New Year; we would lodge them at the Jazz Center, present the Arkestra in a series of concerts in our after-hours performance space called the Jazz Gallery, and host daily workshops with the band where local musicians could meet, hang out, study and play with the members of the Arkestra.

After a full week of nightly concerts which were carefully taped for posterity, culminating in three shows on New Year's Eve, Sun Ra ended his residency at 6:00 am January 1, 1981, by sending band representative Danny "Pekoe" Thompson down to the studio where I was packing up the results of our live recording sessions.

Pekoe asked if we'd like to co-produce an album from the tapes with them, and I was curious as to what that would involve. When he mentioned that they would want us to pay for issuing the record, I explained that there was nothing in the Jazz Center's pitiful budget for such a project.

"Oh, man," he sighed, "Sun Ra says just reach down in that oil money and pull some out—they won't miss it."

And there it was: for something like fifteen years, while I had sacrificed all available funds, energy, and even my reputation at times to present the Arkestra in Michigan as often as possible, Sun Ra had taken me for an heir to the Sinclair Oil Company fortune!

I saw Sun Ra after that many times over the years and never failed to recall that shocking conversation. I would continue to appreciate the music and performances of the Arkestra as long as Ra lived, but the avid idealism which had driven me to pursue these great feats of derring-do would never again return.

—New Orleans
July 29,1999/
London
August 26, 2008

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY MUSIC

REISSUES, MEMORABILIA & THE ONGOING ACTIVITIES OF THE SUN RA ARKESTRA UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ALTO SAXOPHONIST MARSHALL ALLEN

by Pete Gershon

IT'S JUNE 10, 2009. Spread out across the stage at New York's Abrons Arts Center are five musicians whose collective history tells the story of the last half-century of creative jazz. There's bassist William Parker, who came through the ranks of New York's loft scene in the seventies and eighties to become the lynchpin of the contemporary avant-garde jazz scene; Hamid Drake, whose work with Don Cherry and Fred Anderson has made him a sought-after drummer in a variety of free jazz and world music contexts; saxophonist Edward "Kidd"Jordan, whose instrumental talents have sometimes been overshadowed by his reputation as one of the country's premier jazz educators and one of the founders of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival; and Henry Grimes, who after being a first-call bassist for the likes of Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler and Sonny Rollins in the sixties, vanished from the scene for thirty five years, only to resume his career exactly where he left off. But at stage left is the Vision Festival's guest of honor and the recipient of its annual Lifetime Achievement Award. This star among all-stars is eighty five year old Marshall Allen, who with alto sax, flute, oboe, and a variety of other instruments in hand, has dedicated most of his adult life to playing, supporting and preserving the music of one of the most important yet least understood musicians to have walked the Earth: keyboardist, composer and polymath Sun Ra.

On this night, as on all nights when he takes the stage, Allen is a beaming, ebullient presence. Greetings are exchanged, hands are shaken, records are autographed, pictures are snapped. He has time for everyone. After the volcanic all-star set, he sheds his baseball cap and street clothes

and re-emerges in the shimmering, sequined vestments that signify his role as the director of the Sun Ra Arkestra. Tonight he will lead a nineteen-piece band of musicians who've worked with (or been inspired by) Sun Ra through a program of fourteen compositions. Much of the music was written by Ra, but several pieces were penned by Allen himself since Ra's departure from the planet in 1993. Half a decade after the band's formation, they're still on a fearless quest for the farthest-out sonic materials, though they're also rooted in a big band tradition extending back to the days of Fletcher Henderson and Count Basie. Somehow, this mix of eccentric dissonance and majestic big-band harmony is unfailingly resolved into a unified whole.

There's no show quite like an Arkestra performance. A tight, swinging arrangement of Duke Ellington's Black And Tan Fantasy might bump up against a freeform sound exploration. Group chants and singalongs exhort the audience to "Travel the Spaceways" and the "Space Voice" Art Jenkins warbles through the wide end of a ram's horn. Fifty three year old saxophonist Knoel Scott is likely to make his way to center stage and gyrate through a series of incredible handstands and backflips. And when Allen solos on the alto, one expects the horn to blow apart, a flurry of molten shrieks and squeals leaping from the bell. He jerks the reed violently in his mouth and claw-handedly strums the keys as if he were playing a guitar. It's a spectacle. It's beautiful. And it's truly a joyful noise.

It's a ripe time for all things Arkestral. The surviving band keeps up a hectic schedule of international performances, and a new CD on In+Out: *Live at the Paradox,* presents a September 2008 festival performance. Classic Sun Ra albums are being reissued, previously unavailable archival recordings are surfacing, and relics from the band's earliest years are being shown in a traveling exhibition. The keyboardist who famously claimed to be from Saturn, after years of struggle and outright ridicule, has finally been taken seriously as a vital member of the jazz canon.

A month after the Vision Festival, I've arrived at the small rowhouse in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood where the Arkestra members have lived communally since 1968. Once the site of rigorous daily rehearsals, the house on Morton Street is a quieter place these days, with Allen and saxophonists Knoel Scott and Yahya Abdul-Majid as its

remaining inhabitants. I call upstairs to let Allen know I'm at the door ("Did you ring the bell? Yeah, that thing's been broken for fifteen years.") and we ascend the narrow staircase to the third-floor room which serves as his workspace, stuffed with books, photographs, artwork, tools and instruments. Allen manages to keep up a schedule that would exhaust the resources of someone half his age. The band has just returned from gigs in Portugal and France; next week they'll head back to Europe for appearances in Italy and the UK. In between, "the maestro," as he is often known, is enjoying visits from family and friends, cleaning the house and repairing his horn.

Born May 24, 1924, in Louisville, Kentucky, into a family with a brother and five sisters, Allen says of his early years, "There wasn't much for me in Louisville. We got out when the flood hit in 1937. My father was in Philadelphia, so I came up here. All these bridges around here you see, that bridge across the Delaware, he painted all those. I couldn't handle that stuff, being up on those wires. Once, the platform broke and he fell ninety feet, he must've been way up top, riveting, painting, that's the kind of work he did."

Allen's mother sang in church and played piano at home. "My brother's still got her piano after all these years. But I liked the swingin' stuff, the big bands, that's what I went after." He admired the work of Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson and tried his hand at clarinet and C melody saxophone, but admits he didn't stick with it at first.

Then Allen left the states in 1944 with the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the army's 92nd Infantry Division. "I was acting so bad in Philadelphia, there was gangs fighting all the time. I didn't know nothing about no violence, but [the army] recruited me anyway, got me away from all of that mess." Allen wound up stationed in Heidelberg, Munich, and eventually outside of Paris, and he joined the 17th Division Special Service Band. He was honorably discharged in 1949 and enrolled at the National Conservatory in Paris where he studied alto saxophone on the GI Bill and played in informal settings at night with expatriate saxmen James Moody and Don Byas.

"It wasn't no problem meeting people," says Allen of his years in Paris. "I was a young man then. Everything was an adventure! I got my check each month, paid my rent. I lived off the Champs Elysees at the Rue de

Ponthieu. In fact it was right near the Lido, right across the street from where the Lido girls used to live, now they were some fine ladies!"

Allen drifted home in 1952 and settled in Chicago, where his mother was living. There he worked on an assembly line polishing camera lenses and formed his first band, a small group with tenor sax, vibes and drums that played dances and club dates. But then he'd find a record that would change his life forever. "Joe Segel had a store down by the camera factory," he remembers, "and I used to go in there to buy records. One time I went in and he said, 'Have I got a record for you!' " It was *Jazz in Transition,* a dollar-ninety-eight sampler issued in 1956 by producer Tom Wilson that introduced the roster of talent signed to his fledgling Transition label, including Donald Byrd, Cecil Taylor, and, playing an original composition entitled Swing A Little Taste, an eleven-piece combo led by a pianist who'd named himself Sun Ra. "That was some straaaange music," says Allen. "And Sun Ra was on there swinging!"

THE COMPLICATED STORY of Herman Poole Blount and his transformation into the mystic bandleader Sun Ra has been recounted many times elsewhere, perhaps most expertly in John Szwed's book *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Pantheon, 1997). By way of a brief summary, Blount was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914 and displayed great skill at the piano from an early age. He attended concerts by touring big bands whenever possible and developed an uncanny ability to transcribe their charts from memory. Blount was a loner and an honor roll student who began to spend much of his time reading at the Black Masonic Lodge. At twenty, he began touring with Ethel Harper, one of his former high school teachers, who'd decided to pursue a singing career. When Harper abandoned the group in the middle of a tour, the group became the Sonny Blount Orchestra, though the young pianist was loath to assume a leadership role. The group eventually returned home and disbanded, but Blount's career as a professional musician was well underway, and Birmingham's musical community engendered a sense of black pride in one of the country's most segregated cities.

After attending Alabama A&M as a music ed major, and continuing his career as a bandleader, Blount was drafted into the army in 1942. He

refused to serve, however, declaring himself a conscientious objector on the grounds of both his religious views and the chronic hernia that would plague him throughout his lifetime. His case was rejected and after a series of appeals and an eventual arrest for failing to appear at an alternate service camp, he was classified as 4-F and returned to civilian life in Birmingham, angry and distrustful of authority.

In 1945, Blount migrated to Chicago, where he played with blues singers and in Calumet City strip clubs, but also quickly made his first important professional associations, rehearsing and arranging music for one of his idols, bandleader Fletcher Henderson, at the Club DeLisa, and working briefly with saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and violinist Stuff Smith. By 1951, he was leading the Space Trio with saxophonist Laurdine "Pat" Patrick and drummer Tommy Hunter, performing his own original compositions.

Off the bandstand, Blount's worldview was changing in profound ways. Chicago was a hotbed of socio-political activism and the scholarly Blount's studies of Egyptology and Black history and his developing interest in the possibilities of space travel led him to a secret society on Chicago's south side. There he crossed paths with a fellow outcast named Alton Abraham, who'd become his business partner for much of the rest of his life.

It was in late 1957 that Allen first encountered Blount, who in October of 1952 had legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra and who'd begun to tell stories of an abduction experience that revealed to him that he'd actually come from Saturn. He'd also by then assembled the nucleus of his "Arkestra," retaining Pat Patrick of the Space Trio, and adding the tenor saxophonist John Gilmore, alto saxophonist James Spaulding, bassist Ronnie Boykins, baritone saxophonist Charles Davis and drummers Robert Barry and James Herndon.

"I went looking for him," remembers Allen, shaking his head as he meticulously disassembles his saxophone, "and when I found him, all he wanted to do was talk. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. He talked so much, he talked all night long! I went from talking to Sun Ra to going to work, trying to polish those lenses and I'm falling asleep. Then I went back and Sun Ra would talk some more. We'd go out to the nightclub, and then it's four o'clock in the morning again. And I said, 'when am I gonna play?' The next

day he told me to come to John Gilmore's place, and to bring my flute. I said, 'I ain't got no flute!' So I borrowed one, and when I showed up for rehearsal it was just me and Sun Ra, and John Gilmore was asleep in bed. I did a lot of them private rehearsals, and I was determined to get into that band."

But what exactly did Allen find so appealing about Ra's music? "You're hearing it now!" he exclaims, cocking his ear to the stereo, which is playing one of a plethora of recent reissues of Ra's music. "What's goin' on? And he had a strange way of explaining his concepts. All that stuff he's talkin' about, goin' to space, all this Buck Rogers shit I'd been reading about in comic books.

"And all the weird dudes in Chicago who had all these ideas about designing spaceships, all the dreamers, started hanging around Sun Ra. He had this crew of people, started putting together a whole organization. Same as the Muslims were recruiting young men, the Christians were recruiting, the unions were recruiting, Sun Ra was recruiting too! They had these platforms in Washington Park, the Muslims had a platform, the Christians had a platform, and the space folks had a platform. Everybody'd be passing out these pamphlets. And Sun Ra's talking about all these double versions of the Bible, turning all that stuff around, everything I'd ever heard, he was saying just the opposite. Believe it or not, I was still curious about all these things I didn't understand or didn't put too much belief in, and later in reality I began to see the things he was talking about turned out to be so true."

With their Transition debut, *Jazz by Sun Ra* (later reissued by Delmark Records under the title *Sun Song),* already out on record store racks in 1956, Ra and Abraham had formed one of the very first musician-run labels, El Saturn Records, to issue a series of 45s and even complete albums, beginning with *Super-Sonic Jazz* in March 1957 and *Jazz in Silhouette* in 1959, which were sold directly from the bandstand. Ra began to fortify the live performances of his off-kilter swing tunes with costumes and stagecraft; by 1960, the band had begun to wear space-age tunics, capes and hats. They used a primitive light show, and sometimes released wind-up toy robots into the audience.

A FORTUITOUS SET of circumstances has recently opened a window into these seminal days of the Arkestra. In the fall of 2000, Chicago-based writer John Corbett rescued a collection of El Saturn memorabilia from destruction; it's currently on display in a traveling exhibition, *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn and Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68.*

"I had the great fortune to be contacted by Alton Abraham after I'd written an article about Sun Ra for *DownBeat"* explains Corbett, "right around the time that Sun Ra had passed away. On our first meeting, he produced this incredible artifact, the name change papers that changed Herman Poole Blount to Le Sony'r Ra. He brought these papers along as a way of demonstrating that he was who he said he was, which I had no question about, but he seemed concerned in some way about proving his identity. Over the course of several interviews, he and I discussed the fact that he had an extensive collection of materials from the Chicago period and a little beyond, very extensive in fact."

Corbett offered to lend a hand finding an appropriate museum or archival context in which to house the collection, a proposition to which Abraham enthusiastically agreed. However, finding a suitable and welcoming home for the materials wasn't as easy as it had initially seemed, and the idea went nowhere.

After Abraham died in 1999, says Corbett, "a salvager was invited to salvage the house, and he brought out a sample of material because he thought a friend of his would be interested in this "spacy stuff" She saw that it was Sun Ra material and leapt to the assumption that this was Sun Ra's house being demolished. She circulated an email somehow to enough people that it got forwarded to me. I immediately knew what was going on, and almost deleted the email, thinking that there were probably going to be a million people clamoring to deal with this. But then I thought, what if there isn't? What then? This could be a disaster."

Corbett traced the email back to its source and eventually met with the salvager. "The house had been sold and the contents were in the process of being discarded. Some material was taken by the family, and the rest was in the process of being disposed of, and I think a substantial amount of material had already been thrown out by the time I got there." Corbett

remembers bags of clothing being brought out on the curb, and in retrospect, worries that among them might have been some of the band's original costumes, which Abraham had secured from a defunct opera company. "But overall I think we were successful in making sure that the things that shouldn't have been discarded, weren't. I bought all of that material, and then spent the better part of eight years sorting through it with the intention of putting an exhibition together. There were amazing revelations in the process, including the writings, which were more or less unknown previously, although they'd been alluded to in numerous cases, especially by John Gilmore, who was very fond of talking about Ra's writings and how they had circulated in Chicago."

In addition to the writings and business papers, the stash included much of the original artwork, color separations and print blocks for the early Saturn LPs, all of which were hand-screened and assembled in Abraham's basement. Many of these designs were created by a man named Claude Dangerfield, a classmate of several of the band members at Chicago's DuSable High School. Corbett hasn't been able to locate him, despite an exhaustive search.

"He wasn't a musician," says Corbett, "he was an amateur artist, or a friend of theirs who had artistic leanings, and maybe had a little knowledge of design, I'm surmising this, I don't know for sure."

Displayed on the walls in the gallery of the Institute of Contemporary Arts at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia this summer, Dangerfield's renderings of space age themes and surrealistically deconstructed instruments (which were eventually used for the LPs *When Sun Comes Out, Super-Sonic Jazz* and *We Travel the Spaceways),* bespeak a time of incredible optimism, creativity and fierce self-reliance for the emerging El Saturn Records. Other artwork was created by Abraham's associate James Bryant, and by Ra himself.

"The thing that I'm continually drawn to is the various ways in which these early record designs manifest," says Corbett. "You had a bunch of amateur designers doing these things. And they knew enough to be doing overlays, or using onionskin paper, or vellum, but it's not super high-tech. I'm very fond of Claude Dangerfield's first sketch, one of the first sketches for the first Saturn LP. When I found it, it was crumpled into a ball, and we

had to humidify it to open it up and flatten it, and it was this amazing colored pencil drawing, with this kind of apocalyptic scene. But what's funny is, it's clearly an LP design, but it's not square, it's horizontal. It's fascinating to me that here's a guy who's been invited to make a record cover design for them, and he's basically just coming up with some themes, but he's not even thinking about how this is going to be used for a record. To me, that says a lot about the DIY nature of what they were getting into, that it was very much of a self-invented thing that they were doing. I think the nature of those objects, and then the relationship between the metal print blocks and the record covers, the way that that unveils the process that they were using in Abraham's basement laboratory is just so unreal, so incredible."

Still, says Corbett, "I think the most profound objects in the archive were the Sun Ra writings, the fact that we get a glimpse of his philosophical notions, laid out the way they are from that period, where we hadn't had that before."

In what way has it changed his understanding of Ra? "First of all, you find there's very little about space in them, and a hell of a lot more about the Bible. And this is my interpretation of it, but I think the historical facts bear me out, we see him moving from a relatively isolated enclave that's almost completely African American, even though they're playing some white parties and white clubs, primarily he's preaching to a black audience in Chicago, and in doing so he can talk about the Bible in a way that assumed that they're familiar with it and that that they will understand a lot of the references he's making. And there's a tradition of street-corner preaching that he's tapping into. When he moves away from Chicago and starts to really consider what he's doing in a more national and then an international scope, he begins to increase the amount of space-talk and space metaphor and reduce the amount of biblical and mystical material. So what you're seeing in these writings is [work from a time] when the equation was really shifted the other way, and the emphasis was reading the Bible as a coded message."

The show made its debut at Chicago's Hyde Park Arts Center in 2006 and after its present stop in Philly, will move on to the Durham (NC) Art Guild's CCB Gallery in late August. A full-color catalog is available, as well as an

anthology of the rescued Ra writings, both published by Chicago's WhiteWalls Books. Corbett had hoped that the exhibition might lead to a permanent home for the collection, and it has done exactly that.

"Lo and behold, it worked like a charm. The jazz archive at the University of Chicago came forward. That was the optimal place, exactly the place we wanted to do it. We don't own this stuff." Corbett stresses. "It was more like, we accidentally became stewards of it, and we had to get it into a safe place."

DURING HIS LIFETIME, Ra released countless records . . . quite literally. While the Arkestra had brief flirtations with a few well-established labels over the years, including Impulse!, ESP-Disk and A&M, the preponderance of his tangled discography is made up of small LP pressings sold directly from the bandstand. Some were clad in blank jackets with blank labels, many were hand-decorated by band members in marathon arts and crafts sessions at the Arkestra house. Some titles are merely rumored to exist. And in recent years, Ra's legacy has been enriched and extended by a cottage industry of reissues and archival releases of varying pedigree and legitimacy, with material ranging from the late fifties through the early nineties.

"I'm interested in them," says Corbett, "But I'm not so interested in many, many, many sets and rehearsal outtakes unless there's something really special about them. And I'm not so interested in tapes that are sort of truncated, or badly recorded, just because they're there. I'm more interested in them if they're introducing a composition I've never heard before, or something I didn't already know. For example, I think the wider availability of the Pharoah Sanders record is a major step."

Recorded at New York City's Judson Hall on New Year's Eve, 1964, the Saturn release of *Sun Ra Featuring Pharoah Sanders & Black Harold* has been a legendary, much soughtafter title ever since it was pressed in limited quantities in 1976. It's just been reissued on CD by Brooklyn's ESP-Disk, with an additional forty five minutes' worth of material. It's the only recorded documentation we have of the fiery tenor saxophonist's term with the band.

“That’s an insanely important record,” says Corbett. “It’s historically important in the context of the development of free jazz, given when and where it was recorded, but it’s just simply a great record. I’m very interested in the music that came from 1964, 65, 66, it was an extremely fertile time, and anything I can find from that period, I’m all over it.”

By the end of the fifties, Ra had begun to lose touch with some of his key musicians in Chicago, and in July 1961 he took a small group to Montreal for a couple of months’ worth of work. When their permits expired, the band then traveled on to New York City and became stranded there when Ronnie Boykins crashed his father’s car into a taxi. With no money to fix the car, they were stuck. Gigs were scarce for the first few years, but the band felt rejuvenated in New York and threw themselves into rehearsing new music and experimenting with new recording techniques, producing the extremely psychedelic, echo-laden *Bad and Beautiful* and *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* (in Szwed’s book, he called it “low *budget musique concrete”).* The group moved decisively away from their swing band roots and began to delve deeply into avant-garde experimentation.

Moving on to the East Village, the Arkestra fell in with the city’s developing avant-garde jazz scene, living blocks away from Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, and numerous other pioneers of the new music, including saxophonist Farrell Sanders, who had just moved to New York from Little Rock and was working as a waiter at Gene Harris’s Playhouse where the Arkestra had found a regular gig. It was Ra who tagged him with the name “Pharoah” and he offered him a place to stay at the Arkestra’s house. Eventually Sanders would become a full-fledged member of the band when John Gilmore took a brief sabbatical from the Arkestra to play with Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers and pianist Andrew Hill.

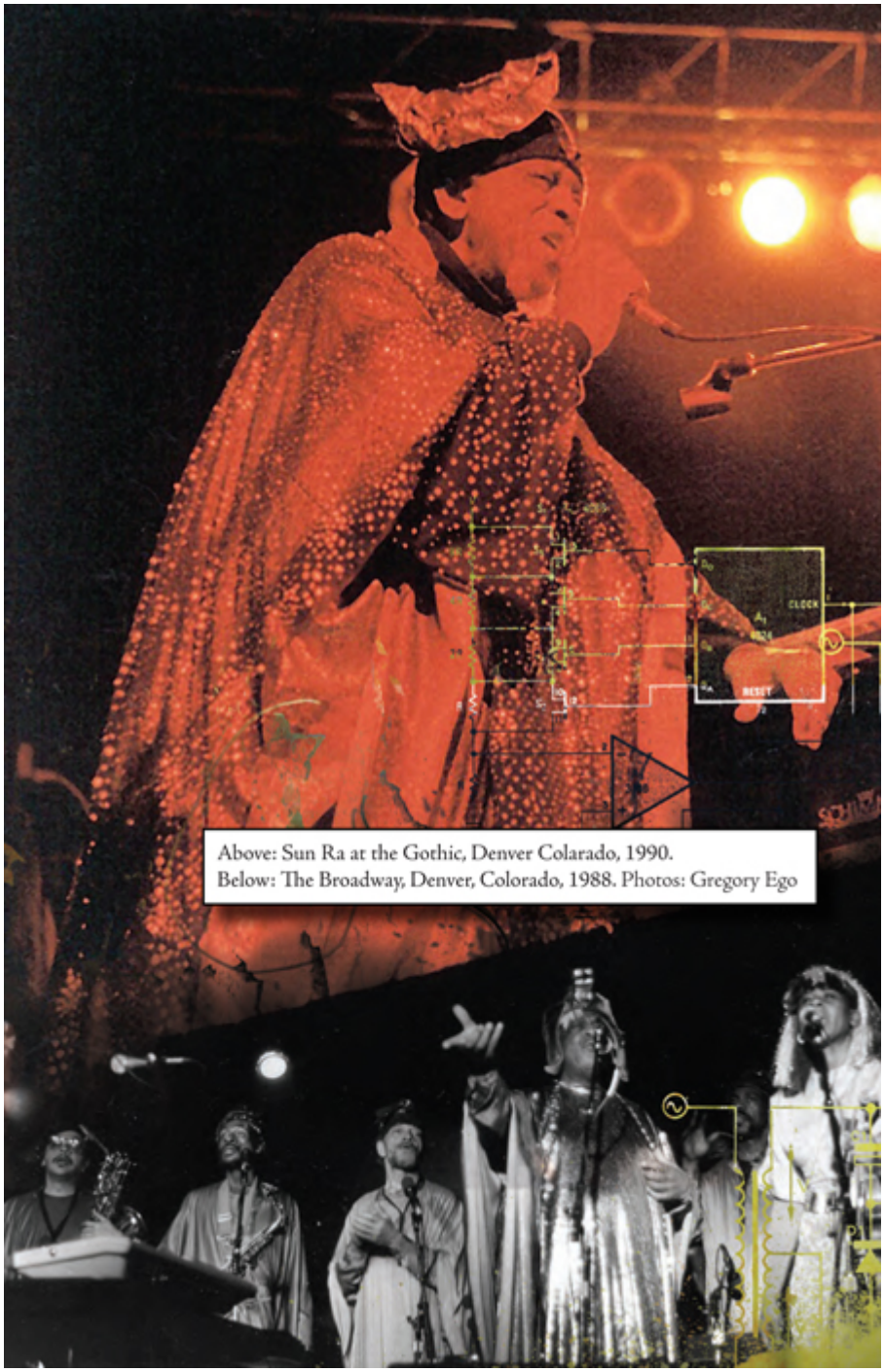
The assorted avant-gardists of the lower east side began to work collectively for the first time in 1964, when trumpeter Bill Dixon formed the short-lived but influential Jazz Composers Guild, a cooperative organization which aimed to improve the lot of emerging creative musicians through collective bargaining when it came to record contracts and live performances. There was also a series of fall concerts entitled the “October Revolution” which featured numerous Guild members, including Ra of

course. Bernard Stollman, a young attorney who lived in the neighborhood, happened to drop in, and found most of the talent that he'd soon be recording for his fledgling ESP-Disk record label. The October Revolution was followed up a few months later by "Four Days in December," culminating with the Arkestra's New Year's Eve set heard on *Featuring Pharoah Sanders and Black Harold.*

Stollman would go on to release three Arkestra records: *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volumes 1 & 2* (in April and November 1965, respectively) and *Nothing Is,* a live document from an ESP-sponsored tour of upstate New York colleges in May, 1966.

Stollman remembers one occasion around this time when Ra asked to talk to him in private. " 'Bernard, I'm very troubled,' he told me. 'Everywhere I go, I hear people copying my music. I can't stand it, here I am struggling, and they're using my music!' I said, 'How often do you think these people get musical inspiration? Not very often. And how often do you get ideas? Constantly! You get more ideas in a day than most people have in a year! Isn't that true? Well, look at it this way, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and they wouldn't be copying your material if they didn't admire it.' I told him eventually he'd get recognition for his ideas, and he seemed mollified by that."

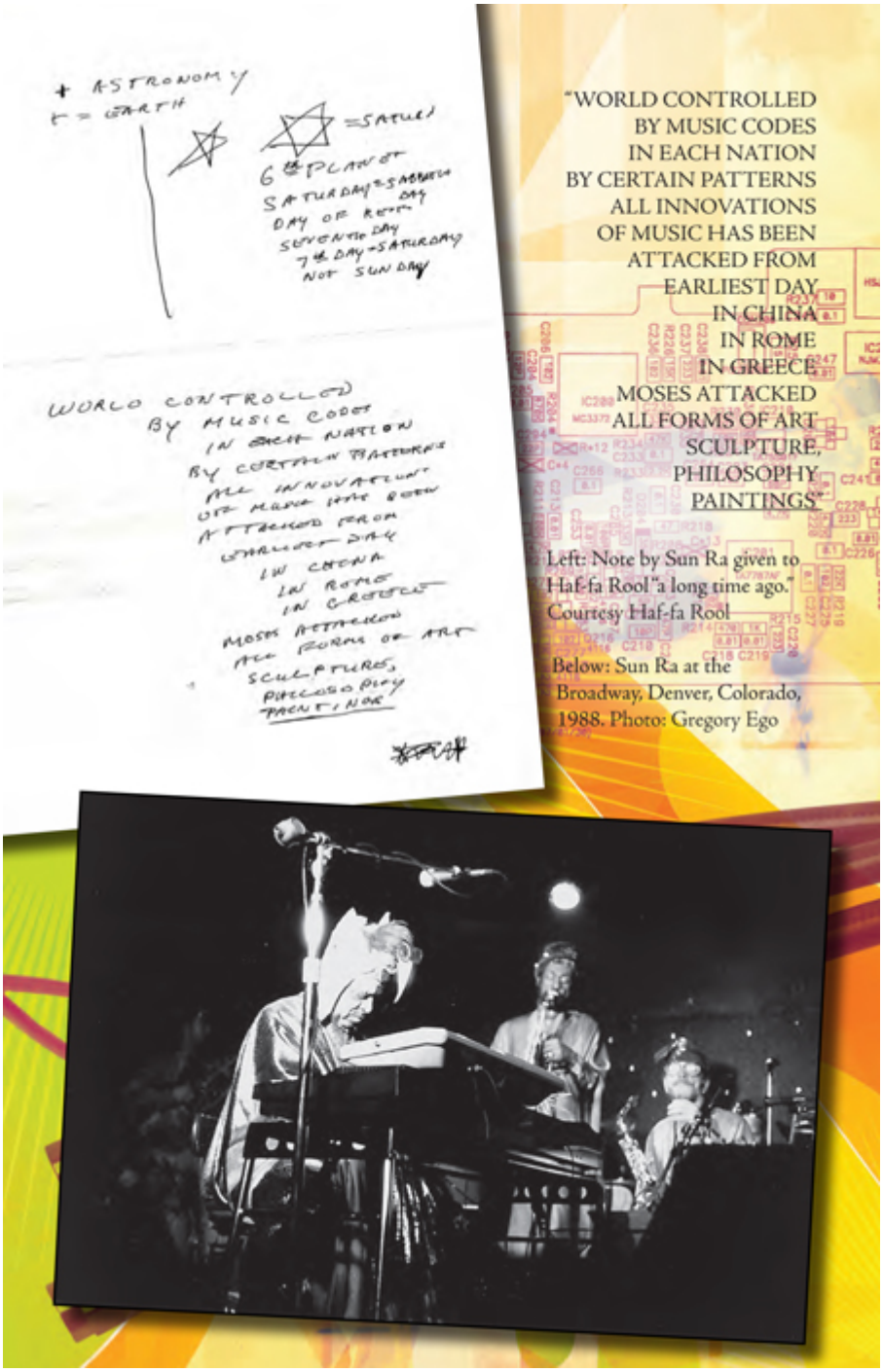
THE MAN RESPONSIBLE for bringing the Pharoah Sanders material to light is Michael D. Anderson, who spent a decade with the Arkestra as a percussionist and Ra-appointed band archivist. In the years since, he has been a radio personality (known as "the Good Doctor") on a variety of stations, and since 2004 he has worked closely with ESP-Disk to reissue many of its free jazz classics with supplemental material and interviews. Anderson came to the Arkestra during the years after their move to Philadelphia in 1968. Ra once remarked that, "to save the planet, I had to go to the worst spot on Earth, and that was Philadelphia, which was death's headquarters." In reality, they were about to be evicted from their residence on New York's lower east side, and in a gesture that would help get them through the next forty years, Allen's father had offered the band the use of the property he owned on Morton Street.



Above: Sun Ra at the Gothic, Denver Colarado, 1990.
Below: The Broadway, Denver, Colorado, 1988. Photos: Gregory Ego

From top: *The Immeasurable Equation* (featuring a cover photo by Leni Sinclair); *Butt Rag* fanzine featuring Sun Ra; "Sun Ra Research" t-shirt. All images this page courtesy Gregory Ego.

A collection of Sun Ra CD releases on Art Yard Records, a London based independent record company established in 2004 to bring some of Sun Ra's lesser-known works to new generations of listeners.



Left: Note by Sun Ra given to Haf-fa Rool "a long time ago." Courtesy Haf-fa Rool

Below: Sun Ra at the Broadway, Denver, Colorado, 1988. Photo: Gregory Ego

"ON OCTOBER 18TH OF 1977, Sun Ra gave me the position as director of archives," says Anderson, "because he and Alton at that point had a, we'll say a disagreement, and that's when we started pressing stuff at the house. I used to do transfers of reels for him when I worked at WRTI at Temple University. Relative to the Pharoah Sanders situation, the whole

concert was recorded, two sets, but the remainder of the concert footage is distorted very badly. But from back in the seventies, I still had the actual mono reel used to press the record, and I did some research with [Abraham associate and El Saturn founding member] James Bryant in the late nineties. He'd send me tapes to inventory. They were out of their boxes, no information on them, but I have a photographic memory and I was able to listen to the reels and recognize that it was more material from that concert. I sat on that stuff for almost fifteen years. But since Sonny's legacy is starting to be swept under the carpet, I started to pull out some of this material and I'm trying to get things together to release some material that will benefit the band, since Marshall's having some trouble getting the bills paid."

Anderson has access to more unheard Ra material than anyone else on the planet. "I've been in the shadows for over thirty years, because Sun Ra wanted it that way," says Anderson, who came to the band as a troubled teenager in the mid seventies and who immediately impressed Ra by taking the initiative to keep the band's recorded material in order. "Sonny was my surrogate father. June [Tyson, Arkestra vocalist] was my surrogate mother. They took me in. Marshall was like my uncle. John [Gilmore], all those guys, they adopted me. And I miss 'em all."

Anderson hopes to issue more material but is adamant that any such releases must be done properly. "There's a lot of shit to come out, and we're trying to get things together legally and financially such that I can go ahead and do what I need to do. If people are willing to work with me, I'll work with them. If not, I was told to 'burn it up.' See, in the seventies, I was known as 'the saboteur.' Because people were stealing tapes from the house, and because of my editing experience, Sonny instructed me to cut up the tapes. I could spread out a session over nine reels. [Later, when] Alton and James Bryant were sending me stuff, I could put it all back together because I had taken them apart in the first place and knew what I did. I hated that job, I was like the damn grim reaper. I'm like, 'Sonny! I can't do it!' but he said, 'that's your job, that's your discipline.' And what could I say but 'ok, I'll do it.' "

Suddenly, our call is interrupted. "Hello? Are you there?" he says. "Yes? Hello?" It seems I can hear him, but he can't hear me. I hang up and try to

call back . . . but the line is dead. After a few minutes of confusion, we're able to reconnect. "That's Sun Ra," he says. "I'm serious. I'm clairvoyant and that was his intervention." The field of Arkestral scholarship is rife with stories of journalists who went home from interviews with blank and garbled tapes or experienced unusual power outages, so who's to say?

Anderson's now in the painstaking process of reassembling the original reels, and is also writing a detailed memoir of his experiences with Ra. He has compiled a fifteen-hour documentary, accessible on the ESP website, which contains hours of unheard material, dating back to Ra's earliest recordings.

"Sonny already had the 'sound mirror,' as he called it, in the late forties, where he recorded on paper tape," says Anderson. "I had those paper tapes. Sonny gave me all this stuff to inventory and had me annotate what all the songs were. See, I was the only one who could do it, since I know all of Sonny's compositions as well as other songs that most people wouldn't know outside of standards. He does a beautiful version of Yesterdays, and I believe it was [trumpeter] Bill Coleman, but in an interview I did with Sonny, he mentioned Jesse Miller as well, so you see, I'm always trying to correct information. There's also a beautiful recording of Darn That Dream. He would just let tapes roll. And most of these recordings are in pristine condition."

ANDERSON HAS also been instrumental in helping to produce a small but very potent series of reissues on the British Art Yard label, whose proprietor Peter Dennett says by email from London, "my job has been over the last five years or so to help tell the story of the visionary Sun Ra, and help future generations reclaim the legacy of Sun Ra's music. It's the appropriate time, we are in the twenty first century and this is twenty first century music."

Composer and sound artist Dennett first encountered Ra's work in the mid eighties when the homemade, hand-decorated LP pressings began to turn up at the ReR shop in London at £3.99 apiece. "They were fantastic," he writes. "From that point I was a fan. The music really seemed to transport me into another place/state of mind, it was a very uplifting experience!"

Art Yard had its beginnings in a Sun Ra documentary film project Dennett pitched to the BBC. The film was short-listed, says Dennett, "but eventually ignored by all of the UK TV companies as too esoteric. Alton was the president of Enterplanetary Koncepts [Ra's publishing company] at that time, everyone told me I had to deal with the president. He asked me to do some work for him— 'research'. I come from a background in music research and sound restoration, engineering, mostly jazz. That's been my main gig for some time.

"[At first] I just wanted to try and get some of the records back out. I got in touch with Marshall, as I wanted keep things straight with him, make some LPs and set up something that helps everyone involved—try to get it right! It's important that it's recognized that the Arkestra organization is a part of this work, not just as performers; they are the original crew that helped create most of these recordings and worked on various levels of the production. Give the credit where credit is due. Copyright law is different in the UK than in the USA. Copyright law has a purpose, to protect the works of the writer and artists, also the record company, the performers and publisher. But there will always be conspiracy theories and disputes when it comes to money and rights."

Dennett's label debuted in 2004 with an LP pressing of *Disco 3000,* Ra's classic (but previously very hard to find) quartet date, recorded in Milan in 1978. He admits its original Art Yard release, "could have been done a bit better. There were some mistakes, miscommunication. It's easy to get things wrong when you're three thousand miles away. all small independents start with a rough cut and improve with time. The important thing is to try to make the records sound better, not worse. I still do most of the design work, so I hope people dig the vibe."

There's now an improved CD version of *Disco 3000* available, as well as two historically important volumes of long out of print and previously unavailable material from the Arkestra's trip to Egypt in December 1971. With regards to the label's future plans, "I have some great unreleased tapes: Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Research Arkestra, Paris 1971, recorded by Radio and Television Nationale France. There was a near riot before the gig [as] the police wanted to close the concert down, but there were too many people so they had to let Sun Ra play. That's two and a half hours

long and it's a mindblower! I want to try and get it released later this year; Knoel Scott is writing [liner notes] about that concert. I do have other unreleased master tapes but it will take some time to collect together the correct photos and words from the people who were there before we make a release. But it will be worth the wait."

For his part, John Corbett is unabashedly enthusiastic: "Spectacular. *Disco 3000?* Unbelievable, I cannot say enough good things about that reissue. They've done absolutely everybody proud. That's the way it ought to be done."

In terms of sheer volume, probably nothing can match the release program underway by the Los Angeles based Transparency label, whose catalog contains twenty Sun Ra releases at the time of this writing, ranging from *Untitled Recordings,* a single disc containing a 1985 concert at Brooklyn's Prospect Park bandshell with drummers Milford Graves, Andrew Cyrille and Don Moye plus a couple of mid seventies rehearsal outtakes, to a ten CD set documenting a complete three-night run at Toronto's Horseshoe Tavern in 1978. And for over-the-top Arkestral gluttony, how could anything surpass the twenty eight CD box set containing the complete recordings of the Sun Ra Arkestra's residency at the Detroit Jazz Center, taped during the final week of 1980? (The two-and-a-quarter inch thick, three-ring bound set is opened to disk five on Allen's shelf when I visit: "I'm trying to make my way through this and not lose my place," he tells me.)

In fact, Transparency is fifty three year old Michael Sheppard, who in the mid eighties moved in the same circles as pioneering alt-rockers Mike Watt and Sonic Youth. In fact, his short-lived and fiercely DIY Iridescence Records released Sonic Youth's split 7" with Lydia Lunch, *Death Valley '69,* and Sheppard was later evicted from his apartment after hiring the band to play on the building's loading dock. He parlayed some modest financial success and a rolodex full of useful contacts accumulated during several years in underground book and CD publishing into the launch of Transparency, which has also released music from an eclectic roster of outsider artists including jazz bagpiper Rufus Harley, home-taper R. Stevie Moore, hard-rocking psychedelic guitarist Helios Creed, and Italian classical pianist Alessandra Celletti. Still, Transparency's mammoth Sun Ra

rarities program has probably attracted more attention to the label than anything else.

Sheppard started Transparency after seeing some video footage of Arkestra concerts and quickly released six DVDs' worth of material (primarily late eighties sets from New York, California and Europe) before shifting his focus to audio CDs. It's a varied collection of offerings, culled from numerous private collections and ranging from the mundane to the amazing. The three-CD set containing a fairly unremarkable audience recording at Los Angeles' Myron's Ballroom in April of 1981 may not inspire repeat listening, but I find myself coming back again and again to the soundboard recording from the Warehouse in San Francisco in 1971, which is supplemented by an additional disc containing a lecture delivered by Ra during his tenure on the faculty at UC Berkeley that same year. A 1972 recording of a previously unreleased extended work entitled *Intergalactic Research* is a valuable addition to the Ra discography, and maybe most interesting of all, Transparency offers a five-CD set documenting almost all of the fall 1983 European tour of the Sun Ra All-Stars, where Ra, Allen and Gilmore were joined by trumpeters Lester Bowie and Don Cherry, saxophonist Archie Shepp, bassist Richard Davis, and drummers Don Moye, Philly Joe Jones, and Cliff Jarvis.

"One of the things I'm really proud of," says Sheppard with palpable enthusiasm, "my DJ friend Bennett Theissen from Kill Radio, he told me he grew up listening to Sun Ra, and that the stuff we've done on Transparency has been such a surprise for him, all the lost reel psychedelic stuff, that it gave him a much wider perspective on Sun Ra than he'd already had. Because one of my specialties has been the really psychedelic stuff from about 68 into 72, maybe even 73 or 74, where it's almost like they've stopped playing jazz entirely."

Transparency's most recent releases include a six-CD set of recordings from the tail end of the Arkestra's extended residency at New York City's infamous Slug's Saloon, recorded at two gigs in June and August of 1972. The tapes are imperfect but very listenable and provide a fascinating glimpse of the band at the peak of its live performances. ("Slug's!" remembers Allen, "Yeah, right on Thursday, we'd just roll on down Avenue C. Oh man, we used to play from eight or nine to four in the morning.

You'd be lucky to catch a nap on the bandstand when somebody'd take a solo! Maybe you'd get a break when there'd be a fifteen minute drum solo so you could run off to the toilet. Yeah, that was really a grinder.")

Sheppard expresses particular pride in the release of *Live in Helsinki 1971:* "My absolute favorite. It's two CDs of a radio broadcast of such high quality that it sounds like a missing studio album. It will include a nine minute interview DVD from the same time that was only aired once on Finnish TV, all of this licensed from the YLE, the Finnish state radio network."

But some Ra scholars are put off by the often imprecise sessionography of the Transparency CDs. "I'm dubious about the dates, I'm dubious about everything," says Corbett. "About the partial personnel listings. It just seems shoddy to me, and it makes me shy away from them, to be honest. And I don't doubt there's great music there."

Of course, it must be pointed out that even Ra's own releases of the Arkestra's music were often low budget affairs that were rather imprecise with respect to such details, and that as someone who often spoke of hiding his gems in chaos, those aspects of the Transparency program might well have appealed to the intergalactic trickster.

"Those are bootlegs," Michael Anderson says flatly of the Transparency releases. "I don't know where those tapes came from."

Sheppard says he's spoken with Anderson and acknowledges that the two clearly didn't see eye to eye. "With everyone else I've spoken to in and around the Arkestra, it's been a total love fest," Sheppard contends. "It's this one guy who's been trying to zap me with negative energy. He seemed really upset that we were releasing these as complete concerts. He wanted to do releases that were more tightly edited, like from a radio programmer's point of view. He asked me, 'How would Sun Ra feel about these things you're putting out?' and I was like, 'What? Sun Ra slugged it out for years to make sure his music would prevail. He would love the idea that people still care about his music and still want to hear every single note of it.' So I never talked to that guy again."

Still, one can understand the protectiveness that people within the Arkestral fold feel when it comes to Ra's recorded legacy. Sheppard, too, speaks

with outrage about the countless tapes and reels that vanished mysteriously from the Ra house over the years. Many more recordings were made surreptitiously by fans at concerts or sourced from radio broadcasts and the like, and eventually some of this material has found its way to the market illegitimately. On the other hand, it wasn't unusual for Ra to arrange the quick sale of the rights to a concert tape in order to find enough ready cash to fly the penniless band home from some far-flung locale. It speaks to the affection Ra fans have for the band that many who've later reissued such tapes have made a concerted effort to take care of surviving Arkestra members.

In the liner notes to the 1997 reissue of *Cosmo Sun Connection,* Chris Cutler of ReR recalls, "Back in the late seventies and early eighties, [we] imported a great number of Saturn records to Europe. we always paid in full and in advance to cover their pressing costs. Then came an occasion when there was nothing to collect; the Arkestra had urgently needed money and ours had been there—so they had spent it. In the spirit of generous compromise, Sun Ra gave us, in lieu of the unpressed LPs, the *Cosmo Sun Connection* master tape, which we released in a small edition in 1985 . . . Money from this CD will be given directly to the Arkestra, whose work it is and who gave it to us."

Numerous other labels have contributed to the effort to make important Ra material more widely available. Chicago's Atavistic Records has reissued several rare El Saturn titles under John Corbett's direction (including *Music from Tomorrow's World,* a set of early recordings made during the band's residency at Chicago's Wonder Inn, and *Strange Strings,* on which the Arkestra members were instructed to play ethnic stringed instruments that were completely unfamiliar to them). And London's Leo Records has released several live Ra CDs, including the previously unavailable 1975 recording *Live in Cleveland* earlier this year.

And it would be an enormous oversight not to mention the reissue program that started it all, namely the series of twenty one Sun Ra CDs released by Jerry Gordon's Evidence Records between 1991 and 2001, including a "greatest hits" compilation and a two CD set of collected 45" singles. Gordon launched Evidence after shuttering his Philadelphia retail store Third Street Music; having stocked Sun Ra's private pressings for

years, he recognized the music's importance and the Ra reissue program became one of Gordon's favorite projects. It's fair to say that his careful reissuing of some of Ra's most vital music at the dawn of the CD era, including *Jazz in Silhouette, Angels and Demons at Play, Atlantis* and *The Magic City,* helped rescue Ra's catalog from potential obscurity. Certainly Gordon had rescued the band from financial disaster, according to Anderson: "Jerry Gordon, bless his soul, he was our savior. Many a day we didn't have any food, we didn't have anything, and Jerry Gordon took care of us."

AMIDST THE REISSUES, books, films and exhibitions, there's universal agreement that Marshall Allen is the true keeper of the Arkestral flame. Corbett was on hand to see the current-day band perform at the unveiling of his exhibit at the ICA. "The thing that really struck me is that there's outrageous energy and spunk," he says. "There's great dedication there. I think the band's not as tight as they used to be, but that's understandable. They're trying to keep something together that's hard to keep together. And it was Ra that was the great disciplinarian, discipline and precision were his watchwords. Most of all, I was struck by what an spectacularly underrated saxophonist Marshall is. And maybe that's because, especially in the late sixties and into the seventies, he played two roles. He was the section man, playing the charts with everyone else, and then when he was out front, he was taking some completely excruciated solo, so you rarely got a sense of what he would do as a melodic player, the way you did get a sense of that with Gilmore. And when I saw the band in Philly, I heard Marshall warming up, and he sounded fantastic. He can squeal with the best of them, but obviously he comes from a changes background. Marshall sounded amazing in a variety of modes."

Ra's departure also seems to have allowed him to step out on his own for the first time. For years, Allen's only recorded credits outside the Arkestra were pianist Paul Bley's 1964 ESP date *Barrage* and from the same year, African percussionist Babatunde Olatunji's *Drums! Drums! Drums!* But since the mid nineties, Allen's contributed to a number of albums in collaboration with friends like drummer Lou Grassi, multi-reedist Mark

Whitecage, NRBQ pianist Terry Adams, and others, and these small-group efforts give the listener a deeper understanding of Allen's capabilities.

The 1996 recording *Surrender to the Air* brought Allen and fellow Arkestra members Michael Ray and Damon Choice together with musicians from improvising jam bands Medeski, Martin and Wood, the Aquarium Rescue Unit and Phish, and helped to cultivate a new generation of Sun Ra fans (though some presumably did not get what they bargained for; eBay is still flooded with excess copies at as little as a dollar apiece). When we meet, a trio gig with pianist Matthew Shipp and guitarist Joe Morris at Yoshi's in San Francisco and a London appearance with drummer Paul Hession and bassist John Edwards are both still fresh in memory; he's slated to play in Philadelphia with synthesist Charles Cohen and Man Man drummer Chris Powell in late July, with an All Tomorrow's Parties set joining Canadian laptopper Dan Snaith's Caribou Vibration Ensemble scheduled for September.

Back at the Arkestra house, I'm querying Allen on the development of his style and technique, one that's *sui generis* in the music, but it's clear that the man would rather just play than dissect and analyze his own approach. "Well, everything I played that was right and correct, Sun Ra didn't want that, it wasn't what he was after. So I was confused. What does he want? He didn't want me to play like I was taught, all that training, all that study, he didn't want none of that! He told me to play what I didn't know. Just use the spirit, or something! Use a different technique, a different understanding. I did everything I could possibly do, everything I did that was out of order, now that was good, that's what he liked! That was the process. You learn how to play eight bars, or sixteen bars, and Sun Ra wants you to play thirteen and a half bars! Or no bars! How do you do that, right?"

It's doubtful anybody would ever accuse Allen of sounding timid or unsure of himself on the bandstand. Director Robert Mugge was in Philadelphia during my visit for a twilight screening of his documentary *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise* on the ICA's outdoor patio. It contains the best footage of the Arkestra available, much of it shot a few blocks away on the roof of the International House on a steamy afternoon in the summer of 1980. ("It was so hot that day," recounts Mugge, "that some of the Arkestra members' rubber flip-flops began to melt into the gravel up on that roof.")

In these clips, one gets the sense of being surrounded by the Arkestra, of being in the very center of the intergalactic action. But just as compelling is the film from a 1978 engagement at Baltimore's Famous Ballroom. Ra spins like a dervish while soloing on a vintage synthesizer, his forearms, elbows, the backs of his hands cascading across the keys. Later, to his left, Allen stands and takes a vein-popping alto solo, eyes fixed straight ahead in concentration. The solo comes to an abrupt climax and the audience members at the ICA loudly applaud the projected image of the then middle-aged maestro. Thirty years later, the solo is every bit as compelling as the day it went ricocheting around the Ballroom.

"You just gotta cut out the BS and build something," says Allen modestly of his loyal dedication to Ra's music. "You just can't be ballin' around all night and then come in and create something all day! You just gotta forget that, you've done enough of it already, you know what that is, now do something you don't know. Create something from scratch, from any idea you come up with. What do you got? Take whatever you got and start building. If you ain't got no material to build with, then create some material!"

Allen puts out his cigarette and goes downstairs to greet some visitors, and saxophonist Knoel Scott takes his place. Scott came up as a student of multi-reedist Makanda Ken McIntyre at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, and he tells the story of his Arkestral initiation thusly: "I went to hear Sun Ra at the Beacon Theatre in 1976. And that was it. I already felt that *Jazz in Silhouette* was the greatest jazz record of all time, but this concert. Sun Ra was up there, looking like an Egyptian god, June Tyson was an Egyptian goddess, and Marshall and [fellow alto man] Danny Davis were like twins up there . . . incredible music, incredible spirit, and the symbolism . . . [it was] everything I'd ever felt in my heart about who I was. Right then and there it became my life's dream to be in this band. And within two years, I was."

Scott speaks glowingly of Allen's role as a mentor for him as a new initiate. "If you didn't get your part right, Sun Ra would turn you over to Marshall. He wouldn't turn you over to John [Gilmore]—man, he had eyes that could slice you up with one look. Marshall was a lot more patient. You know, what I really want to see Marshall get, as the premier avant-garde

alto saxophone player in the world, and as one of the originators of the avant-garde if you think about it, in light of his contribution of over fifty years and for the work he's doing at an age where most people are sitting back in their lawn chairs, is the Jazz Masters Fellowship, so he can put those resources into maintaining the Arkestra, and maintaining the house here."

Built in 1925, the Ra house is showing its age. The roof leaks, the air conditioning is broken, and shoddy repairs after a fire about ten years ago have started to come undone. Inside, an archive much larger than that of the ***Pathways*** exhibit is deteriorating, with no concrete plans yet in place to safeguard it for posterity. In a just world, the building itself would be declared a historical landmark and preserved as such.

"He feels an incredible responsibility to Sun Ra's legacy," Scott continues. "I mean, he left it with Marshall, his treasures. When a genius that comes along once in 5,000 years leaves the planet, and leaves you with their legacy, yes, it's a tremendous responsibility, and it's not something you can easily walk away from, especially after having spent nearly half your life with that person. No, of course, he can't let Sun Ra down, and he's not gonna let any of us let him down, especially since he's waiting for us. You know, we're all gonna have to face him. All I want to hear is, 'Well done,' that's what we all want to hear from Sonny and John and Pat [Patrick], the only words we want to hear. 'Well done.' "

Scott departs as Allen returns to the room; the maestro's grandson had dropped by to borrow some money to buy diapers for his new baby. Allen takes the new Art Yard reissue of the Arkestra's self-released 1979 LP *Sleeping Beauty* off the shelf and puts the disc into the player. I ask him if he ever receives communication from Ra in any tangible ways. "Yeah, of course! When I started I couldn't understand none of this, now I understand much more. He's talking to us right now!" The title track's gorgeous, modal keyboard groove builds, and Allen begins to sing along with Ra and Tyson. "Sleeping beauty, sleeping beauty. Without Price Charming, there's nothin' black beauty can do. What's he talkin' about? All these songs, listen, you know how to get into it, but once you're into it, you can't get out of it! You could play this all day long, just take it around and around and around again."

With Damon Choice's vibes and Ra's Rhodes piano filling the room with a thousand twinkling stars, he shakes his head, eyes closed, lost in a reverie. "Every day you got to get the code and the vibrations of today in there. Not the code from yesterday. You got to try better! If you're sincere about it, you can go anywhere. And if he's out there with you, it's good. Sun Ra's right here, right here with us in this room, you hear it? Sleeping beauty, sleeping beauty, I want to speak of black beauty to you . . . See, we ain't got out of it yet."

On the CD, Allen's alto takes hold for a brief, ecstatic solo and the maestro's eyes are still closed, his mind in some far place, many light years in space.

THE GREAT & WONDROUS SUN RA

JOHN SINCLAIR IN CONVERSATION WITH WAYNE KRAMER

City Inn Art Cafe, London
June 22, 2008

JOHN SINCLAIR:
Wayne, let's talk about Sun Ra for the record.

WAYNE KRAMER: Yes, the great and wondrous Sun Ra.

How did you first hear Sun Ra? Because in those days, in the sixties, it was difficult to get access. When I first heard him it was hard to even put your hands on a Sun Ra album.

Well, the first ones I ever heard were at your house, in your music room—you had these ESP-Disks.

The ESPs were like the opening of Sun Ra to the world.

Well, that was my connection, and *Heliocentric Worlds* was the one—I was experimenting with psychedelic drugs in those days, and I would go over to your house and put on *Heliocentric Worlds* and I just—I *heard* it. To me this was the absolutely perfect music, it was correct, it was—I got it, like, it was all there, it was complete, you know. And it was everything I was looking for, that I couldn't find on the radio or, you know, I mean—I'd come up through Chuck Berry, and rock bands, and instrumentals, the Ventures and all that, but knew there was someplace else to go. And when I heard Sun Ra, I said, 'Oh, that's the—there it is, he's opening the doors, this is the portal into the music of the future. '

Now is this Volume 1 *or* Volume 2 *[of the* Heliocentric Worlds] *that you're referring to?*

The one with the gold cover with Copernicus on it! *[i.e., Volume 2].* But the other thing that got me about Sun Ra is that you had done an interview with him, and I was listening to the interview, and there were like traffic noises—car horns were honking, and Sun Ra was talking about, he wasn't interested in freedom. People would think that it was free music, but it's not free. He said, if I had my way I wouldn't let people protest for freedom, I wouldn't let them fight for freedom, I wouldn't let them die for freedom. I'm not interested in freedom, or peace—neither one. He said, "I'm interested in discipline," and he said, "Peace you get when you die." He said, "they put you in a place where somebody comes and does the grass for you, and nobody bothers you there, and it's quiet, and it says right on the stone there, Rest In Peace."

I'll tell you, one thing about Sun Ra and our involvement with Sun Ra: it was an affirmation for me. We did a lot of shows with Sun Ra back in the day. And the first time we brought him to the Grande Ballroom to play with MC5, they—MC5, we followed Sun Ra and were hugely influenced by him, but we would save that up kinda for our last finale number. So through the show, you know, it would be kinda rock music with some excursions, but the last number would be OUT. Well, when Sun Ra's band came on the stage, they started where we finished. Their first song is out—in fact, Sun Ra would say we're gonna play our most challenging stuff first, and that way it clears out all the.

It gets rid of the squares . . . the dissenters . . .

. . . all the critics, you know. And then everybody that stays is there because they wanna hear the music. So here we are in the Grande Ballroom, and the Grande's getting off the ground now—maybe we had 600 kids in there, Detroit kids, and they came out and they started out in the multiverse, you know, and for a minute it felt like it coulda gone either way. Like, those Detroit greasers—you know, like it's one thing for MC5, we're white kids, you know, we got electric guitars—and now, these are all black people, dressed up in garish spangled clothes, and the music—there's no beat, or it doesn't sound like a beat, it doesn't sound like a key, it doesn't sound like a verse and a chorus, and it was like, the audience, for a minute there, it was tense.

If it wouldn't've been for us, they woulda fled, for sure. If they wouldn't've known that MC5 were champions of this group, that we endorsed them without reservation, otherwise they would've fled at once.

But they stood still long enough—their minds stayed open long enough, and then they heard it. Below the level of consciousness, they got that this was valid, important, worthwhile. Which proves to me, over and over, that the music that Sun Ra created is not elitist, it's not so "advanced," it's not for snobs, it's not too complex, it's not "too difficult"—I mean, it's accessible. This music is accessible. It's rooted in American rhythm & blues and jazz. And it's advanced, but it's not foreign, it's not Martian, it is not removed from the emotional pulse of jazz and blues. No matter how abstract it could get melodically or harmonically, or rhythmically, it's still within that context of African American music—Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future, as the Art Ensemble says.

I always thought it was one of the great twists and turns of cultural history when Sun Ra—when Trane died, and Albert Ayler died, and Sun Ra was marginalized, and Miles kind of took up that space and connected with the rock audience. So the generation of musicians that followed *Bitches Brew* became what was called, unfortunately, "fusion," where nothing ever really fused. And then of course the worst outcome of that is "smooth jazz." The absolute worst, whereas that whole other stream that we were championing, and are still championing, was a more visceral, a more aggressive, maybe.

Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders . . .

. . . more urban, more music of the heart . . .

Rooted in emotion.

Rooted in feeling.

Discipline was Sun Ra's preachment—his major preachment. You know, Michael Ray told me, when they—you know, they practiced every day and they all lived in the same house, so they could get up—and I've seen them do it, when I did that interview in 1966—and I was talking to Ra, he was sitting at the keyboard, it's about noon, and guys start appearing in this

little three-room apartment. I looked over there and here's a guy climbing out from under the grand piano, where he's been sleeping, and I look over there by the window and here's a guy coming off his mat on the window ledge, he's been sleeping there, and another guy's sleeping here, on the couch. They get up, you know, and walk in, have a bowl of cereal, and put on whatever they were putting on—a shirt, or whatever—and then they would come in and, as each came in, Sun Ra would tell them what they were working on that day, and they would start working. And they did this every day.

Mike Ray said they would prepare for a concert, and they would rehearse this music every day for a couple of weeks—different music—and then the concert would come and Sonny wouldn't call any of the tunes they'd been rehearsing. And they also.

Gotta be ready!

That was his teaching. But they would at times study and play the book of Fletcher Henderson, and play through all the Fletcher Henderson charts. He wanted them to know this music—and you'd hear them. The first time I ever heard any Fletcher Henderson tunes was when Sun Ra would play Big John Special. They'd put 'em right in the set: Discipline 27-II, We Travel The Spaceways, Big John Special, Take The A Train—they'd do the whole Ellington book, and he'd have them studying all this stuff so they would understand where these guys came from.

The canon . . .

And they'd do Basie. And this would blow my mind, because I thought they were always trying to go out on the far edge, you know.

Well, in the modern age, we've done three concerts around the world with the Sun Ra Arkestra. We did one here in London, we did one at UCLA in Los Angeles, and we did Central Park in New York with the Arkestra. They came to Los Angeles last year and Elson called me up and asked me to come down and play. That was close to heaven for me.

I said to Marshall [Allen] before the show, 'When I sit in, do you want me to play at the end, on the last couple numbers, or the first couple

numbers, or do you want me to come up in the middle or something?' And he said, 'Play it all, man! Just be ready! Because we don't know what's gonna happen. Just be ready!'

OCTOBER 23, 2006

MY NIGHT AS A TONE SCIENTIST

by Wayne Kramer

In the half-between world,
Dwell they: The Tone Scientists
In notes and tone
They speak of many things . . .
The tone scientists:
Architects of planes of discipline
Mathematically precise are they:
The tone-scientists

—Sun Ra

BRAZILIAN PERCUSSIONIST Elson Nascimento called last week and invited me to sit in with the Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of Marshall Allen. They were Saturday night's ArthurFest headliners, a four-day music festival held here in Los Angeles and curated by *Arthur* magazine.

Was I thrilled? That's putting it mildly. I have had a long-time admiration for the work of Sun Ra and his merry band of intergalactic explorers. Still do today.

I was first exposed to the Arkestra in the sixties with their ESP-Disk, *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra* and others. Those records—and the fact that John Sinclair booked us on a concert co-headlining with them at the Community Arts Auditorium at Wayne State University in Detroit in the spring of 1967—changed the way I would think about music for the rest of my life.

We continued to perform on concerts with the Arkestra over the next few years and I came to spend some time with Sun Ra himself. His ideas about art, music and culture helped form my own. In the modern age, with the

resurgence of interest in MC5, we have been able to reconnect with the Arkestra for concerts in London, New York and Los Angeles.

Although Sun Ra and some of the other founding members have gone on to Saturn, the band continues to travel the spaceways under the able leadership of alto saxophone genius Marshall Allen. Many of the players on the band have long-time membership and the spirit remains completely intact.

So when I got the call, it was as if I was at once being asked to enter into a fifth dimension of my own past and future.

When I arrived at the gig, I took some good-natured kidding from the musicians about the traditional black suit and tie I was wearing. (I had just come directly from a TV studio where my current project, the Lexington Artists Workshop Ensemble, had performed a couple of numbers for the Hep C Awareness Telethon.)

I was informed that, in order to perform with the Arkestra, I would need to be outfitted with the appropriate space uniform. No problem. I put on the dark blue sequined robe and matching headwear with joy.

When I asked Marshall what numbers I should play on, he said, “Play it all. Just be ready, because there is no way to know what might happen.” This has been my personal attitude for years and here it was being conferred on me by one of the masters. Was I ready? Yes, brother! I have been waiting for this night all my life.

I was talking in the dressing room with trumpeter Fred Adams about the music Sun Ra composed and left to them. He told me they have just scratched the surface on the motherlode of unrecorded material. Marshall talked with me about the dilemma of having so much music and so little time to perform it.

I’m not someone who goes for the ritual of a group hug or prayer before a performance, but when I was told to “join-up” right before time to play, I was honored to be included. This wasn’t a religious rite, but an invocation to recognize together who we were and what we were doing right then and there. That we were about to “create music for a better world. On this planet and all other planets!” And that we were all, “Sun Ra".

I took the stage with the players and never felt more proud to be an artist punching in on the job.

The music was expansive. We played inside and outside the forms. Some tunes I could grasp the basic sixteen-bar II-V-I structure and others were way too difficult to attempt. I was standing next to bassist Jiunie Booth and could read some changes from his charts but often they came just too fast and furious for me. Other tunes were deep, deep space grooves that I locked into and worked as relentlessly as I could.

This kind of playing takes a great deal of concentration and my sore wrists reminded me of it later. Marshall was so gracious in granting me a few solo passages. For me, this was Heaven. Of course there were interludes of music that some might call “free music,” although this is a misnomer. When and how you play in this context is anything but free. This is about discipline, not freedom, which was one of the principles at the core of Sun Ra’s philosophy.

Marshall was a consummate bandleader in directing us through these sections. He was very clear and confident about what he wanted and when he wanted it. The Arkestra played, danced and sang and the audience enjoyed every minute of it.

Arkestra guitarist David Hotep is a master chordist and I was trying to keep up, but it was like trying to catch a comet.

Dave Davis on trombone showed his great enthusiasm for music throughout the set, along with baritone saxophonist Rey Scott. As usual, drummer Luqman Ali drove the band with cosmic precision. The final notes played were a joyful exchange between Marshall Allen and tenor saxophonist Yahya Abdul-Majid.

Before I realized it, we had played for an hour and thirty minutes and it was time to go. We had traveled the spaceways from planet to planet and returned to Earth, all the better for it.

Sometimes it just doesn’t get any better.

COSMIC ENGINEERING

JERRY DAMMERS' THE SPATIAL AKA ORCHESTRA

INTERVIEW WITH JERRY DAMMERS
by John Sinclair & Dylan Harding
Brixton Market, London, July 7, 2009

JERRY DAMMERS: Sorry, I'm feeling a little bit naked today. I'm just getting all this new material together for the one rehearsal—it's a bit crazy. I've just managed to get the scores together by the end of it—just in time, you know, always the last minute. I'm not a person who really likes telling people what to do, but you have to, and it's quite stressful.

JOHN SINCLAIR: *What made you take on this project? Where did you get this mission?*

DAMMERS: I just got a vision for these bands, and I just want to make them reality. They're sort of fantasy bands, you know, that's the thing . . .

DYLAN HARDING: *The Sun Ra project: How long have you been thinking about actually doing that? Is it years? How did that occur to you?*

DAMMERS: Well, I had this band called Jazz Odyssey, based on this Spinal Tap thing about you can't play jazz to a festival crowd. So I formed this band based on that, and we did a few Sun Ra covers and I got that together. That must've been about ten, twelve years ago. But everyone was still smoking too much *ganga* then, and that all sort of disappeared in a cloud of *ganga* smoke.

HARDING: *How big was that band?*

DAMMERS: It wasn't as big. it was about eight or nine people. It was one of those bands where the first person has left the rehearsal before the last

person has arrived. It never quite took off. We only did one gig. You know, I had this idea of having a free pub concert inside of the Glastonbury festival, so we went and played at Glastonbury even though we weren't officially booked, you know. We pretended to be another band, and we managed to get in, so we set up and played.

I started off doing kind of hip hop jazz sessions at the WAG club, the old Whiskey-a-Go-Go, and did some jam sessions there with Jason Yard, who's still in the band, and in fact we got the vibes player back who was at those original sessions, Roger Bosely, he was at the rehearsal last night.

SINCLAIR: *What kind of jazz did this band play?*

DAMMERS: It was supposed to be like hip hop jazz, really—funky beats—and at one point it was going to be a crossover between hip hop and jazz. We had a real drummer, but it was very repetitive stuff. Well, like Miles Davis' last album—like jazz over hip hop beats.

HARDING: *Obviously it's a thought you had, but coming up with the idea that you would actually do the Sun Ra thing in costume, did that come to you in a flash?*

SINCLAIR: *But what about deciding to do the music? The costumes kind of come with the music, but what about deciding to do the music?*

DAMMERS: Oh yeah, the music. Well, the music was the first thing. But I think I've always been into jazz, really. I'm not a jazz player, myself.

SINCLAIR: *But being into jazz and forming an orchestra to play the music of Sun Ra are kinda two different things, aren't they? [Laughs.] One is way beyond the other.*

DAMMERS: I had this vision of—apart from knowing about Sun Ra earlier—I always had this idea of being a hip hop producer, so I was always searching for break beats and stuff, and that's when I got into record collecting. And I just dug deeper and deeper into stuff and got more and more . . . So Sun Ra's kinda the ultimate, isn't he, of something? I've been thinking a lot about—yeah, I think he probably was abducted by

aliens, and he probably was sent back to . . . I'm starting to believe it's all true.

But the final thing that tipped me into doing it: I got asked to—they had this arts event at the Roundhouse when it first reopened, it was called *Space* and they had all sorts of art to do with space, and they asked me to DJ a soundtrack to this Russian film about these cosmonauts—they went up into space in the Communist era and while they were there in outerspace, the Communist Party collapsed. And they were in space and they couldn't come home, because then there was chaos. Because, obviously, being cosmonauts they were right in the thick of the Communist Party, and they sort of very happily had to change sides in order to come down again.

It's a great film—it's a documentary, it's not a . . . They were trying to suss out what was going on, and then they started telling them what's happened, that the regime has changed, and he says something along the lines of, "It's a new dawn out of the earth" or something like that. And they get back and everything has changed. I didn't actually use any Sun Ra records in the soundtrack, but—anyway, we had this night, and I just thought that wasn't enough for one night, so I thought what else shall I do to make it a bit more interesting, and I put together a Sun Ra tribute band. And it was amazing—it all came together in two weeks. You know, I've got a good deal of friends who are great musicians, and I got in touch with them and it all came together.

SINCLAIR: *Now your members, were they familiar with Sun Ra's music?*

DAMMERS: Were they familiar with it? Yeah, yeah, it's just to different degrees, yeah. But that was the amazing thing—Sun Ra's got this very special place, hasn't he, amongst musicians? Because he sort of stands for the ultimate in a certain. something. It's hard to say what it is, but through the generations, everybody name-drops Sun Ra.

SINCLAIR: *Now what did you do to prepare the music? Did you transcribe it, or get sheet music?*

DAMMERS: Yeah, I can read music a little bit—not very well, but I got some help from people in transcribing it, and then I organized it all into

kind of a doable structure, you know, because. everything I do has got to be doable, I think that's the.

I think the audience can—although they don't realize it maybe, half the time, but—people can actually feel the structure, relate to the structure of something complicated, how it's put together and stuff, even if that's not part of what attracts them.

SINCLAIR: *They can feel it. I had a mission at one time to expose regular music audiences to the music of Sun Ra, and they loved it. They went wild. It was very gratifying, because I thought they would. [Laughs.]*

DAMMERS: It's very accessible as well. People think it's difficult, but it's not.

SINCLAIR: *It was just jazz fans who didn't get it. Kids who went to a rock & roll show, they loved it. MC5 and Sun Ra—they loved both halves of the bill. It was quite amazing—I thought it was quite a gamble, but it turned out not to be at all.*

HARDING: *Where did "Sonic" Smith get his idea to dress up in costume? Was that Sun Ra? Because I like to think that that lineage—that Kiss is up on stage because of Sun Ra, you know?*

DAMMERS: You're not going to tell me that Pink Floyd weren't influenced by Sun Ra. The first album that they played on was this soundtrack to—what's it called, something about London? [Peter Whitehead's *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London]*—and they do this long jam, and if that's not influenced by Sun Ra, I don't know what is. And all that space imagery they came up with, I'm sure they got that from him. And I'm sure that— because they like to put themselves around as the inventors of psychedelic music, don't they, Pink Floyd, but I'm sure they got a lot of it from Sun Ra. I know Pete Townshend was a huge Sun Ra fan—oh yeah, I mean all those hip guys knew all about that in the sixties. They probably weren't letting on too much, but I'm sure that—I mean, I think that psychedelic music was invented in jazz, definitely, and then a sort of bastardized version was taken on in rock. But the whole idea of that

spacy . . . whatever it is . . . comes from jazz, from all those spiritual jazz guys.

It's kind of poetic as well, isn't it? Oh, very, very poetic. I'll tell you, Sun Ra—I think with all the space race that was going on, going to the moon, America, black people couldn't afford to really—well, they weren't really involved in any of that, so he was having his own space race, you know.

SINCLAIR: *You start talking about in the fifties, he was way out there. Nobody talked about space in an artistic context, or having to do with this is space, you know? Space was out there. You shot things at it, like a moon shot. That wasn't until what, 1969? He'd been into this since the early fifties. When you first saw those album covers with the planets and everything, it was just mind-boggling. But it was all just his vision of the cosmos.*

DAMMERS: But he was always just trying to turn things around, wasn't he, and have a different way of looking at things that always—you get that with Lee Perry as well, that whole thing of whatever the question is, he'll turn the question on itself and turn it around on you, right?

SINCLAIR: *Lee Perry: the Sun Ra of reggae . . . But Jerry, I'm still kinda interested in the nuts and bolts of putting this thing together and then making it happen— convincing these characters to go along with it.*

DAMMERS: I suppose you take Sun Ra's leadership on that, because like he said, the possible's already been done, you know, so I suppose it's just the impossibility of it that's attractive. But also, that's the kind of challenge, isn't it, that he's laying down—to anybody, really, and I sort of thought, well, ok, in that case, a Sun Ra tribute band—what's more impossible than that? In a way, you know, because you can't possibly get close to it. *[Laughs.]* But I do like the idea of a tribute band—just don't do one to yourself. Do it to someone who's worthy of a tribute. Never cover your own material, cover someone else's. But that seems to be the way of the world now—everything's a tribute band, so it's much better to do a tribute to something good.

SINCLAIR: *How did you pick the musicians for this project?*

DAMMERS: Like I say, Jason Yard was there from those jam sessions that I used to hold years and years ago in the WAG club, so he was there from the beginning. Larry Stebbins I knew from the band Working Week, and he's been kind of a free jazz stalwart since the sixties—a great player. Zoe Rahman, I heard her first couple of albums and they were really great, and she had that sort of spiritual thing going on. Dennis Baptiste is another really great player that I knew about mostly just through the grapevine, really. And then there's my pal Ollie Bayley who was in the original Jazz Odyssey band, you know, I've been working with him for a long time—we've been DJing together, and searching out all these records and tunes and everything. I mean, this band is kind of.

That's the other thing: covers bands, that's another great tradition—I spoke to Larry about that, you know. In the sixties and seventies that's how we came up, that's how we learned the trade, was doing covers in the clubs, in working men's clubs, you know, and that's how everyone's been. And that's how you learn. And of course nowadays nobody knows that, but it's actually a great learning process. I'll just say that all this is a learning process, that's why we're doing it, because by doing covers you can learn about. music, and the whole thing's a learning process. And that was a great tradition that we thought was worth reviving, really, you know, and now I'm a bit stuck whether I'm a tribute and covers-band purist—I'm scared to do any of my own material. *[Laughs.]* No, no, I'm joking.

SINCLAIR: *How did you go about selecting the repertoire, once you got some guys together to play it?*

DAMMERS: Yeah, well, I tend to select it. But that came from the DJ—the band comes from the DJ thing as well, because I did a chess club with a lot of spiritual seventies jazz and free jazz, with some very serious chess players. So we had this little club at the Egyptian Room, in the Atlantic Bar—it was a great room, man, it was all done out in Egyptian, and I used to play the records. They had some very serious hard-core chess players there—I mean, some of the chess players, the older guys, couldn't take it, because I was playing really free jazz, but the younger guys . . . "No, no, how else do you play chess? You know what I mean—it drives you on . . . " That's what I was trying to tell the older guys. They

said, “We can’t concentrate—it’s too noisy.” And I was saying, “No, no, you can concentrate better.” I was always trying to tell these guys—tell people that free jazz is, like, the most relaxing music there is. But you’ve got to listen to it, not at it—a lot of people listen at it, and they have a bad reaction. But you just go with it, and it takes you where it takes you, you know.

HARDING: *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy . . .*

DAMMERS: That’s right, it’s very therapeutic. So, from the jazz DJing with chess, that’s when I started thinking that we should try playing some of this music. So that’s where it all came around, you know—it’s all back to front. I always had a vision of it being modernized, because I was very much into hip hop, and the beats, and all that, so our versions of it are more beat-oriented. But then Sun Ra invented all of that stuff anyway—he was playing hip hop thirty years before hip hop. You know, a lot of people don’t realize that the more rhythmic, funky stuff that he did, and the more African-based . . . he was very much taken up by the European kind of avant-garde, but there’s a lot of really funky, African stuff in there.

It was quite funny, because after one gig I came home and I was feeling a bit guilty, you know, should we be playing this guy’s music, and I came home and *Jason and the Argonauts* was on, Bernard Hermann, and I heard a couple of echoes there as well. You know, he was influenced by everything, and unashamedly, and that’s great. But watching *Jason and the Argonauts,* I said, “I know that bass line!” That’s a great soundtrack, Bernard Hermann, *Jason and the Argonauts,* it could be Sun Ra almost.

SINCLAIR: *So what are some of the tunes that you are doing?*

DAMMERS: There’s one called Soul Vibrations Of Man, which I found on a very obscure album. He had an album called *Languidity* in the seventies, which is very funky, and it had Disco Kid on the guitar, and the bass player from Pentangle, what’s his name? Richard Thompson. Yeah, he played on that, amazingly. So that was a good starting point, because we wanted to make it quite funky and quite—some of it’s quite danceable, what we do— and there’s his Where Pathways Meet. He did a

sort of adaptation of *A Love Supreme* called Love On A Far Planet, you know, that was a very funky one that he did. We combined that with a—see, I like mixing and matching things—we combined that with a ska tune, which is actually based on a Japanese folk song, so we put a bit of that in there.

And coming up, we're doing a Cedric Brooks tune, and Cedric Brooks played with Sun Ra. It's amazing how many people did play with Sun Ra. We did Space Is The Place, that's a quite obvious one. We do a sort of mixture between Discipline 27 and Retrospect—you know, Retrospect, that's a great tune. He does a slow version and he does a faster version. You know, we placed Alice Coltrane's stuff in the mixture.

SINCLAIR: *I saw the reviews of your concerts—they were pretty exciting, I thought. I mean, they really liked it.*

DAMMERS: Yeah, we're trying to get a tour together for next year. I'd love to do a residency, I love the idea of a residency. That's another thing that's being lost, you know.

SINCLAIR: *I went to the Sun Ra residency in Tilburg, Holland, last September, and that was exhilarating. They played every night, and they interacted in the daytime, you know. They had the Arkestra for seven days.*

DAMMERS: I saw the Arkestra in Glasgow and they were great out in front, but I also went and stood at the side of the stage where you can hear everything acoustically, and that big band sound—you just can't beat the actual acoustic sound of it, it's just fantastic.

SINCLAIR: *So the first concerts of the* Tribute to Sun Ra *were so much fun that you just decided to expand the repertoire?*

DAMMERS: Yeah, yeah, the first gig we did, you know, it went so well, everyone had a great time, everyone had a ball, the audience loved it, so what you get from there, we just expanded the repertoire, and we've done a few gigs. It's quite hard to get the gigs, because it's quite a big job to put it on and then you've gotta somehow make it pay. But we've just gotta find the promoter— there's gotta be a promoter out there, and I'm

sure it could do fine. I'd just really love to do a residency and find a really good venue and stick to it, and the people would come. We always try and play in really nice venues, generally. We had a gig in Dublin, but we didn't do that in the end. Dublin was funny—he bought the band and he said, "Have you got any photos?" So I sent the photos over and he canceled the gig. *[Laughs.]* He didn't know how he could promote it.

JERRY DAMMERS' SPATIAL AKA ORCHESTRA PRESENTS

Cosmic Engineering: A tribute to Sun Ra and other mystic mavericks

10 March 2009

Barbican Hall, London

Spatial AKA is:

Jerry Dammers, musical director, selector, keyboards

Denys Baptiste, saxes (Mercury Prize nominee, Mobo award)

Larry Stabbins, saxes (Working Week, free jazz stalwart since sixties)

Zoe Rahman, piano (Mercury Prize nominee, Perrier award winner)

Jason Yarde, saxes

Finn Peters, flute (BBC Jazz award, London Young Jazz Musician award)

Nathaniel Facey, saxes (Empirical, North Sea Jazz EBU award)

Anthony Joseph, poet (author, *The African Origins of UFOs)*

Francine Luce, vocals (sung with Lester Bowie, Evan Parker, Steve Beresford)

Neil Charles, double bass (Empirical, Soweto Kinch)

Patrick Illingworth, drums (Pinski Zoo)

Crispin "Spry" Robinson, percussion (Galliano)

Robin Hopcraft, trumpet (Soothsayers)

Mat Fox, baritone sax (Happy End, Kinetica)

Harry Brown, trombone (Jazz Warriors, Jazz Jamaica)

Ollie Bayley, electric bass

Guy Clarke, guitar

Steve Gibson, classical percussion, vibes

BRAIN-TINGLING SPACE JAZZ

by Ian Harrison

THERE WAS A FULL MOON LAST NIGHT—an event that would make our ancient forebears expect insanity, turning into a wild animal and other heightened sensory, mental and emotional states. The latter categories certainly applied when Jerry Dammers' Spatial AKA Orchestra presented the show they call *Cosmic Engineering:* A Tribute To Sun Ra And Other Mystic Mavericks.

Onstage are eight horns, three vocalists, three percussionists, double and electric bass, guitar, pianist Zoe Rahman with Mission Controller Dammers in charge of vibes, direction, keyboards and alien sound effects. The stage is decorated with Egyptian sarcophagi and synth-playing astro-statues, and everyone's clad in Afro-Pharaonic glam gear, with Dammers in a gold head dress with a face on the back—as his reinterpretations of music by the outre likes of Cedric "Im" Brooks, Moondog and Alice Coltrane proceed to show, this man clearly sees in more directions than frontways.

They open with a blistering version of Sun Ra's It's After The End Of The World (with a cheeky excerpt from Joe Meek's I Hear A New World thrown in) and project some wild images of solarflares and the surface of the sun. We are, without doubt, off.

The two hours plus that follow present brain-tingling space jazz with beef and size, and include a cover of Sun Ra's cover of the Batman theme and a re-imagining of The Specials' Ghost Town, the tune gargled by Dammers and with Anthony Joseph adding the words to Sun Ra's scary/comic Nuclear War (it segues into an apocalyptic reading of Ghost Town sung by dub vocaliser Space Ape).

Screen projections of the Arkestra in Egypt, the planets and fantastic visions of life in space keep pace with the fevered sounds. Later, Dammers' reworking of Sun Ra's Retrospect moves from a kind of arch calm to wild frustration, Dammers stalking forth to implore the horn section to greater paroxysms of intensity.

They finish with a hypnotic channelling of Arkestra signature Space Is The Place, the band departing the hall in procession and carrying on in the foyer. Post-splashdown, what to say? Go and see them!

—This review originally appeared in *Mojo*

SCHWARTZEGEIST

LIVE FROM BERLIN: THE SUN RA TRIBUTE PROJECT

by Sadiq Bey

LIVE FROM BERLIN. The Sun Ra Tribute Project has been in the making for a good while. You can only imagine. It is the result of hearing a strange sound many years ago (when vinyl was all there was, unless you had a reel to reel set-up), such an invigorating and activating sound, it changed the way I thought about and even listened to music.

Jimi had released *Are You Experienced,* Trane had released Om, Muddy Waters went electric, I mean ELECTRIC! with Herbert Harper's Freepress News, there was Captain Beefheart and, of course, Frank Zappa rompin' and stompin' and oddly enough, someone turned me on to Raymond Scott's *Soothing Music For Babies.*

However, coming up in Detroit, in those days of free concerts, we were blessed with the presence of Funkadelic! I had been prepped for *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra!* I can still hear what sounded like Buddhist horns in the midst of chaos space, in the inner ear. That's where it all took place . . . inside.

My influences? This feels like a *DownBeat* blindfold test. The City of Detroit. All the Motown giants, especially the poets. Marie Church-Rogers, Marjorie Church, Dakota Staton, Nat "King" Cole, Billy Eckstein, Cal Tjader, Quartet Tres Bien, Bobby Hutcherson, Al Hajj Malik Shabazz, Mongo San-tamaria, Armando Peraza, Fania All Stars, Bird, Dizzy, Olatunji, Andrew Hill, Lee Morgan, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Bill Dixon, Ornette Coleman (the man!), Ravi Shankar, Jimi of course, John McLaughlin, Miles (all of it), Wayne Shorter, Stones, Beatles *(Abbey Road),* Arto Linsey and the No Wave community, Bach, Stravinsky, Puccini, Harry Partch, Cecil Taylor (especially when he dances), Henry Threadgill, Art Ensemble of Chicago (Detroit 67), early Braxton, Wifredo

Lam, Aime Cesaire, Pablo Neruda, Amiri Baraka, Faruk Z. Bey, Abdul Jalil (Slick Campbell), Claes Oldenberg, McArthur Binion, Bob Kaufman, ESP-DSK, Patty Waters, Bad Brains, Bob Marley (and the entire skank/dub invasion), Ska antics, Lee Perry (a master of the unseen), William Burroughs, John Sinclair (brought Ra to Detroit), Herb Boyd, Nick Land, Reza Negarastani, Paul Virilio, Georges Bataille, Felix Guttari, Umberto Echo, Susan Buck-Morse, Avital Ronell, Dr. Cledie Taylor, Michel Foucault, Ishmael Reed, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes *(Weary Blues),* Larry Neal, Dudley Randall, Calvin Hernton, General Baker, Huey Newton, H. Rap Brown, Maya Angelou, Naima Fuller, Stokely Carmichael, Public Enemy, Stephen Hawkin, SUN RA, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Bukka White, Sun House. Of course there's more, but call me!

My band, *schwartzegeist,* takes a cue from Sun Ra's introduction of the synthesizer into the jazz experience and plays on the field of the electro/acoustic with available digital technology and software. We are celebrating the poetry of Sun Ra with original music inspired by the Master Navigator.

For a birthday present, I was given a great collection of Sun Ra's poetry and prose entitled *The Immeasurable Equation,* a book edited by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken (Waitawhile Press) and no longer had to scour the internet or search for early LP covers to gather Ra's written work.

All but a couple of pieces that were written by me are performed poems penned by Le Sonye Ra. We play no Sun Ra covers. His social/political stance was unshakable. His simplicity came from a deep wisdom and experience. There is more inspiration within these equations cum poem tones than one can imagine. I found revolution in I Deal In Souls, Freedom From Freedom and Cosmos Evolution. In fact, his work took hold of my imagination and shook all the conformity into a nice little pile of ashes. I am saying Ra had the power to transform the listener's way of thinking: he was so on the money with *Magic City* . . .

The tribute to Ra took place at the A Trane in Berlin in February 2006 as a contribution to Black History Month. The group was Gebhard Ullmann, the reed scientist (bass clarinet, tenor and soprano sax), percussionist Zam Johnson (from LA) and bassist Kevin Ellington Mingus (San Diego). I

composed and arranged the sound files with additional live keyboard effects and talk-sung Ra's poetic formulas. Subtle living equations!

Our special guest was MFA Kera (Madagascar-Senegal), vibing up the Cosmos Train (Citing The Space Factor) with deep, resonant vocals reminiscent of Mahalia Jackson. We were all surprised at the level of love shared that night. Here's a piece, performed that night, inspired by the master:

FATA MORGANA

Split and conquered atoms make the man.
The answers don't always matter, earth doesn't
Wear out the space of its orbit like a pair of sneakers.
Toddlers with faces of senior citizens at a certain speed.
Morning explains its impish charms, the slight of
Multiple hands, secret equals glamour. This too
Is molecular: mists of energy, certain quantities
Speaking in the tongue of whispers, ones and zeros
And all that shit. Speaking the names and the attributes,
The myths and the legends where everything is angel,
Everything is math and rock and water.
Iris, pupil, cornea, retina, this is what we call sky.
The imagination's imagination, there are no known universes.
I see what you mean. The green of trees rushes by in a blurry heat.
It seems so easy to be free, alerted to the devil in the crowd,
The accusatory glance. Everything has an appetite.

The strength of Ra's poetry can never rest in the shade of history. It must be spoken:

FREEDOM FROM FREEDOM

Freedom from freedom

From the liberty
Of the land
Where destruction's light
Is the land.

Freedom from the decree of freedom
From the liberty
Of the land of destruction
Is the decree

That can truly save
Those whose freedom
Is a burden and a shame
What price freedom that despairs?
What glory freedom that destroys

—Sun Ra, c.1972

Sun Ra was a hero, an American cultural icon and visionary who introduced the notion of space (inner and outer) to those of us who were coming into a new sense of being in the late sixties, those of us who were seeking liberation from the repression of the dominant culture and the master narrative. More than that, he was the inspiration to dare to think differently, to see and hear differently the things normally taken for granted, like stars or science or especially performance of the word.

NEW HORIZONS (FOLLOW THE MOLECULE)

Music pulsing like a living heartbeat,
Pleasant intuition of better things to come . . .
The sight of boundless space
Reaching ever outward as if in search of itself.
Music spontaneous rapture,

Feet rushing with the wind on a new world
Of sounds:
Invisible worlds. vibrations. tone pictures.
A new world for every self
Seeking a better self and a better world.

Music akin to thought.
Imagination . . . !
With wings unhampered,
Unafraid . . .
Soaring like a bird
Through the threads and fringes of today
Straight to the heart of tomorrow.
Music rushing forth like a firey law
Lossening the chains that bind,
Ennobling the mind
With all the many greater dimensions
Of a living tomorrow.

I must say that one of the more successful pieces we performed at the tribute was our version of Cosmos Evolution by Sun Ra:

FIRE IN ZEROLAND

When men are my brothers
They are brothers because they know they are . . .
They walk the initiate bridge-degree
Of pointlessness.
They rise up above because and why
They are brother-friends
Sincere understandingness.
Intuition of/on angelic planes of being.

That is why I have said:

They are not my brothers

If they are not my brothers.

As a result of the Sun Ra Tribute, *schwartzegeist* received the Berlin Studio Project Award in 2007. Subsequently, the “live” experimental tribute developed into an epic electro/acoustic conceptual project dedicated to the writings, life and works of the great Sun Ra. The album *Slow The Ear* is available on the Al-lzeit Musik label out of Kreuzberg, Berlin.

Slow The Ear appeals to the cinematic sensibilities of poetry and music in a digital twenty first century dynamic defined by hybrid forms, aesthetic blends and the freedom to navigate beyond category. It approaches the notion of a dense universe, as in “a wall of sound,” and sets out to shower the audience with love through the alchemy of word and sound.

The lyric content includes a sense of diversity that highlights texts from Sun Ra, the Papyrus of Ani and Guido Cavalcanti (Dante’s mentor) with my original poetry to insist on a return to “consciousness music"—hence, *Slow The Ear.*

THE MYTH, ART & MUSIC OF SUN RA

by Steve Fly Agaric 23

The myth is neither bad nor good,
its potentials are unlimited.

—Sun Ra

SUN RA HAMMERED OUT A MAGICAL OATH early in his life, he lived composed and performed mythmagic music, infinitely transforming performance Arts into a cosmology of performance magic once more, reclaiming outerspace and inner-space for humanity.

Using his practical myth-science *Space* program he pioneered the changing of reality in conformity with will. Sonny led comprehensive rituals (songs) to seduce and propel humanity out from the repetitious death-trip of *Geschich-ten* (history) looming over us, and help each individual attain *escape velocity:* launching oneself *into* the cosmos via music or—teleporting the cosmos into oneself via the profundity of apprehension.

Sun Ra's myth, magic and music are all parts of one ideogram—a new syn-thesis—not merely separate subjects. A Language entity that emerged from menacing gaseous star clusters around Saturn to subvert the solar system and re-tune the cosmos with celestial feedback. Balance-sing the equation. *Ching Ming: to regulate the names and/or to define the correct term.*

Evidence of his successful *mythomagical* methods and workings are found scattered in various multimedia artifacts, ESP phonograph disks, liner notes (spells), album artwork (maps), prose essays and cinematic light shows: *languages* to discover and reactivate *sacra lingua.* The ever changing *name game* waltzes with the ever-changing nature of Sun Ra's music, LO: The ever chanjing Tao. The disciplined band always displays a bright attenuated sense of time division and/or duration—*equazione del*

tempo—combined with *simplicity* of that mystery, all-at-once rounded counterpoint of sound shadows, arking at the moonlight.

Mathematically precise astrological, processional, harmonic equations translated into neurologically modulated word-sound-image communications, distiling the *Hermetic* principle: So as above, so below; across the vibration-spectrum, so enabling magicians to assimilate objects in some sense, by feeling out their frequency, differential SPACE equations and Cosmic *l'espace calculus,* seduced into and beyond music where a cluster of galaxies are pulled down and formulated into practical edutainment language: *Dymaxion* (dynamic maximum tension) in music, to borrow a term from the great design scientist Buckminster Fuller.

I would say that it's black from the point of view
that it's still got the darkness of myth.
And it really pinpoints ancient Egypt
in a definite way

—Sun Ra

A master of vibration-states and music psychology, Sun Ra produced harm reduction *musique* for the *sole: musica celestiale,* shamanic healing frequencies, splicing disciplines into a *moogical* whole using the living multimedia *star cluster* laboratory. Pushing language beyond definition, then pushing down a strange celestial road. Plushing music towords a sacred Key Splace. Unlocking galactic gate-paths into tiny pyramids.

People have two harps in their head,
their ears, just like a harp. They hear by the strings
in their ears. If I play something very strange,
then some strings that never vibrated before
will vibrate. The whole nervous system
will become alive

—Sun Ra

Sheets of sound falling like snowflakes from all quarters. A rainbow phalanx of languages unleashed, crashes of cymbal upon symbol in waves

of rhythm running. Throwing sound and image onto the mind like Pollock's paint particles at the canvas. Liturgical, clinical and comical *all-at-once,* like some writing of James Joyce, *mantracode* for humanity to *unwrap* using their neurological apparatus.

The energy runs straight and direct to the unknown *sens du mystere,* the hidden and secret crevices, somewhere else, out, way out beyond language but made of languages. A space where truth and beauty wrestle within the angular valleys of discord, in the musical nightmaze where Sun Ra dwells, at the edge of the *Avant Garden,* in the swirling mass of gases and forces that compose planet Saturn. "All art is a shadow of the Incarnation" said Marshall McLuhan.

Traveling omni-directionally from the inner horn-space into outerspace, mediated by TIME. Maybe traveling to Titan below your right ear, across to Jupiter at your crown or any other planet you think of within the infinite *time-space* contained within and without each of us. Sonny and his Arkestra demonstrated to us how to coordinate space-time and guide the skyrockets that lie barely inches behind our eye-sockets. *Solfege* flashbacks providing perceptions of simultaneities. Space-time shuttles on a journey beyond stars. Listen again!

When I say space music, I'm dealing with the void,
because that is of space too. So I leave the word space open,
like space is supposed to be

—Sun Ra

James Joyce once said that the individual was *eccentric* and the state *concentric.* In this context Sun *Ra-tunes* into *Heliocentric* worlds and arranges for *eccentric* improvisation, based upon the concentric foundations, a kind of cosmonaut-astronaut rendezvous. Synthesizer synthesis of mythology with practical magic deployed through a multimedia internetwork of things, feeding back diverse language fragments and gaseous traces into an artful congress.

Constellations of sounds swirl beyond language, spiralling and curved: Le Sun Ra experience. A sort of inspired mathematics which gives useful equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, but *equation humaine,*

for approximating human emotions. Names of mystery, *equazione del tempo,* starry dimension.

The tantalizing album, song and band names devised by Sun Ra speak using the condensational methods and—juxtaposition—detectable in his musicare. These mini manifestoes show the alphabetical tip of an audio/visual iceberg floating somewhere nearby in space, the titles often reaching beyond language into numerology language, *kaballa* and mathematical equations.

Sonny's poetry turns the reader's head inside out—like the twisting music, a new meeting of familiar objects, but with a strange sense of something else in the misty distance, a rainbow and counterpointed shadows and shades of meaning—to move rhythmically about it—a return to splendour. Dressed in dime-store regalia, crossing Philip K. Dick with *The Shape of Things to Come* by H.G Wells; a parody upon the entertainment industry hustle in the twilight of the electric tribal *futuristico.*

Most of the time the avant-garde looks so serious . . .
They don't look like they're really having fun . . .
I want people to laugh at the costumes I have on

—Sun Ra

A total assault on the senses, a live audio abduction scenario and light assisted kidnapping of consciousness into the mythic realms and crevices of new espace. Ears are abducted by the shadow: echoes of *onde acoustique,* deep forest calls, seductive polyrhythms that lurk upon African planes. Extended percussion passages take your mind on a marathon. Interpretive dancing matter, singing and shouting matter reproduce sombunal traits of the tale of the tribe—of legend in some literature. Information = What We Cannot Predict. Variations on deviations from interpretations of no fixed melody, comedy.

Cosmic music is a place of tomorrow,
it is the dimension and the balanced perspective of tomorrow.
It speaks to the worlds of the greater potentials
awaiting the peoples of the worlds

at every future point
on every future plane

—Sun Ra

Sun Ra identifies experiences by setting out the parameters of his ART so as to be able to take meaningful measurements and produce meaningful results to share. The question: Language versus the equation, spirals through the music like the double helix of DNA: "What planet is this?" "What planet is . . . this?" RETHINK.

Surprising chants and tongue-fu riddles pitch questions and scenarios amidst the electric sound-tapestry all-around, a crisscross-world puzzle game, forcing the listener to put the words and symbols into the musical KOCMOC (space) made freely perceptible. "What is life? What is death?" Sonny asks, while conducting times-pace using hand and body gestures.

And yet I see beyond that point
For there is counterpoint and counterpoint
And counterpoint dimensions dimension
It is music like the music . . .
The music swells to indescribable sound
Of mystic Everness Eternal Beingness
Chromatic Rhythms.

—Sun Ra
Of Days, from the album *Blue Delight* (1988)

Ra's great corpus of work highlights the often overlooked question of the sacred: What is it and how did it get that way? *Magic Myth & Art? Musica sacra?* Sun Ra balanced equations concerning complex questions—cosmic—in proportion, leading to the awakening of intellect and senses to conceive and perceive such questions.

Now I got the Solar Arkestra,
the Myth Science, and the Astro Infinity
and soon I'll have something else.
Just like a University—

I've got my different courses set up,
and they deal with things
that are gonna be beneficial to people.

—Sun Ra

Rhythmic illusionists, Copernican swing wizards, improvisational bards, sound shaman guides pulsing along African Egyptian furnished passageways to MU, Atlantis or Saturn's moon: *Titan,* adventurers to the underwords inside of allmen. Each individual on stage animates the dance of shadows, makes them BOP with one another, transforming their apprehension of the cosmos. The Arkestra acted as an invisible black college of occult jazz study, teaching and spreading knowledge, discipline, humor and precision through Art. "Illusion is a REVOLUTIONARY weapon" wrote William Burroughs in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970).

Sun Ra conducts thunder enlightening on piano, adding Hammond, solovox stylings and Clavioline craftsmanship over time, riffs rain down like shooting stars, and the SUN HARP itself. Eloe Omoe blows a menacing bass clarinet clearing the FOG with his great horn. Atakatun, Odun and Chiea: six hands and thirty fingers on congas flowing like the Nile. Tommy Hunter finds percussion instruments to further coordinate river flows. Ahmed Abdullah blows *trompette* romancing guardian angels into the stream. Billy Higgins and Earl Buster Smith trade *batterie mathstrology* under the stars.

Philly Joe Jones and Clifford Jarvis float by with Marshall Allen aboard a sunship, orchestrating forces through courses of Van Allen bolts with flute, piccolo and alto saxophone calls. Knoel Scott modulates spheres with an alto sax. John Gilmore cracking open the clouds with tenor sax, searing high, so high the birds get dizzy and then that great bass boom. John Ore, from the Thelonious Sphere Monk spaceway swings the bass around the nodal axis, they dwell on other planets. Roger Blank and Robert Cummings drum and play the *systeme solaire.* Yes. Danny Ray Thompson, Michael Ray, James Jacson and those I left out.

Early hard-bop structures melted like Dalf's clocks into neo modal tidal pieces with no fixed harmonic structure, free to change with seasoned

eccentricities, the superimposition of one chord over another. Ply upon ply.

SUN RA SYSTEM

But you got
Any Sun Ra records or DuBois books?
Otherwise
You gon die
With the murderers
& crooks.

—Amiri Baraka, *Words from Sun Ra*

A NUMBER OF VARIED TRIBAL CULTURES throughout human history have composed devices to track the Sun, Moon, and other celestial phenomena. Some mapped the seasonal changes, calculated calendars and some recorded solar and lunar eclipses, asteroid and meteorite showers. Many structures on planet Earth such as the Egyptian and Mayan pyramids show evidence of intelligent design and precise alignments to cosmological processes: sunrises, Solstices, moonrises, Equinoxes, moon sets, comet cycles etc.

But what of the ancient languages of chanting, singing, dancing and spoken word used within ritual spaces opened up by shamans and wizards of harmony? When I wonder about a cosmological and/or celestial music I find the work of Sun Ra and his arkestra "key" to non-simultaneously apprehending the BIG questions about spacetime "outerspace *vs.* inner-space" and the difficulties to communicating sensible messages about these things—things way out there— beyond language, pushing at the furry edge of the infinite donut omni-verse like a pair of puckered lips anticipating their double.

The music, myth and magic of Sun Ra has enriched humanity with a cornucopia of experimental research data and psycho-archaeological investigations into the social, psychological conditions and spaces we inhabit. I gravitate towards my ideal Sun Ra system—or network of ideas—as a sort of planet, or cluster of planets and gasses representing my thoughts

and experiences, fly agaric 23 from another star system. This is how I would like to view the life and music of Sun Ra, by joining his cosmic-philosophy and ritual musical experiments together and looking at them from an outerspace view.

I first encountered Sun Ra as a curious DJ, having spent thirteen years coordinating sections of SUN RA music into some of my DJ sets and musical recipes. I give credit to both Kevin Gator and Keith Hopewell (Part2) for igniting my initial interest in Sonny, Afro-cosmic jazz and black music culture in my early twenties. For me a combination of Rammellzee's *Iconic Treatise on Afro-Futurism* mixed with Kodwo Eshun's book *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Black Sonic Fiction,* plus the electronic-induced revolution taking root in the nineties around the UK, spearheaded by many African English DJs, producers, artists and some live musicians during the nineties and into the new millennium, mostly from low income areas of urban Britain.

This electronic revolution, sparked off by both drugs and computers in the hands of the few creative people who used them to manufacture their own music, culture and scene, independent of the major labels and trappings of the vulture capitalist entertainment industry, making independent record labels and locally supported enterprises.

And although the music hardly resembles anything Sun Ra produced, the cultural activities surrounding the underground UK rave scene of the nineties and the SUN RA SYSTEM meet, in me, and the memes oozing out from both of these musical phenomena have many criss-crossings that, in the UK, writers such as Kodwo and Simon Reynolds have documented.

In the swirling blackness of audio SPACE the wisdom of Sun Ra can reignite the humanistic and scholarly traits to SUN RA SYSTEM and cascade into a new musical congress: musical beings and walking encyclopedias of the cosmic wisdom of the spheres.

To the makers of music—all worlds, all times

—Engraved upon the Gold Disk bolted onto Voyager 1,
now estimated to be over fourteen billion miles away

As DJ Fly Agaric 23, I have my own biases and favorite myth stories—I guess a combination of the kind of Directed Panspermia theory devised by Sir Francis Crick with the Cosmic Schmuck principle of Dr. Robert Anton Wilson—inspired, in a musical and aesthetic sense, by Sun Ra, whom I consider a balanced mixture between mask and anti-mask, self and anti-self, mythical being and historical personae.

As a DJ it seems somewhat easier to escape into a cosmic pseudonym of galactic proportions, a great name, simply spinning joyful space noise from magical disks. Without theoretical explanations or historical context in the literary sense, it is easy to get lost in space, but Sun Ra shows how to bind time-space and to bind space-time and make sense of them with new maps as recordings and performances as metaphors.

As Acrylic Figa—another alter-ego of DJ Fly Agaric 23—I began to write and conduct literary based research into language and poetry, pursuing a five-year long study of another system of information called MAYBE LOGIC, as defined and described by Dr. Robert Anton Wilson, whom in my estimation voices the scientific-philosophical counter-melody to the joyful Sun Ra sounds and loads the Kosmic Trigger Figures and fires the fugues in/out of the heed.

I guess it would be through the trans-humanist and trans-personal psychology, and through the exo-psychology, exo-biology and cyberpunk ontology language of Dr. Timothy Leary that reads and feels to me like the experience of listening and watching Sun Ra and his Arkestra at play/work. Tim also had a cosmological/neurological “spacetime” philosophy including an exit strategy and space migration system including relativity, in effect translating fields of scientific and humanitarian study into new languages, condensed and indexed exo-philosophy and trans-humanism, in accord with the new data, the research from outerspace exploration and inner neuron-space exploration in 2009.

The equation “Space Migration plus intelligence squared equals life extension,” intuited and developed by Dr. Leary, could be a helpful gloss or another lens through which to view the Sun Ra Myth Science System and other cos-mological attenuated music such as that of John and Alice Coltrane, and the modern, free and “out” jazz explorations that bloomed throughout the explorative sixties parallel with the NASA space programe.

Maybe it's nothing Aaah
Maybe it's nothing
What? What? Oh

—Sun Ra, Revolution 9

A SYSTEM to mean a systemic internetwork of interacting sub/disciplines, a nodal cluster of disciplines from across a broad range of cultural spaces and epochs. In Sun Ra, Leary and Wilson we might highlight the following recognized academic spheres of scholarship and the ability to connect historical individual and communal experience together, in TIME. History; cultural studies and gender studies; philosophy, aesthetics and semiotics; ethnology and cultural anthropology; archeology and prehistory; psychology and sociology; physiology and neuroscience; acoustics and psycho-acoustics, computer/ information sciences, theology, trans-humanism, space migration, intelligence increase.

Add together the encyclopedic genius of John Sinclair, Amiri Baraka and other living cultural critics and collaborators of RA and you have a tidal force for cultural change crashing down and around you from all quarters, sweeping you up off your feet into the neurological torrent of myth/music and healing tones for motherfuckers too busy talkin' shit on telephones to hear the future.

The aim of this project is to build up a language in which certain falsifications inherit in all existing western languages will be made incapable of formulation. The follow-falsifications to be deleted from the proposed language.

—William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (p. 33)

Reshaping and juxtaposing 10001 songs/texts/memes together into the SYSTEM, radiating an original and coherent unity, like that of a whirling galaxy or human cell cluster whose branches of multiple meaning are a function of the experimental formulae and Futurist, Dada surprise donut coating.

Remy de Gourmont, the great French spaceman, and in particular his principle of the "disassociation of ideas" seems to describe the peculiar perception of no normal sequence of events in Sun Ra's musical journey. Light and dark, tonal and atonal, asymmetrical orchestrations mixed, photons and electrons dancing—the push and pull of TIME—sucked through and spat out into acoustic spaces of euphony. Yes. The name game turns and the BE Bop Kabala begins, cypher sounds flowing like electricity, exploring the infinite combinations and ways to say something, life, love, melody, memory, yes.

The Tale of the Tribe might hint at A Tale of an Ethnic Group, as Ethnic Group and Tribe are somewhat interchangeable terms, in which case we have a complete system of tribal wisdom wrapped up in Sun Ra and his Joyful Noise. A perfected model and SYSTEM of language, musical mappings, ritual dance, piercing poetry, sincere scholarship and heart-stopping humor with which to compare and analyse other ART, from other cultures and regions of the planet Earth, and to consider the limited resources and challenges overcome by the great Black American pioneers of this music and language the world has come to realize, was some of the greatest musical expressions of human life—and the bombardment of information, light and sound that we all encounter and filter through our brain-body systems—ever created, in my humble opinion.

In his books *Sacred Drift* and *Irish Soma,* Peter Lamborn Wilson has extended the rather deserted landscape of intelligent Afro/Celtic historico-ethnographical research and brings a basis for further mythological, folkloric and ceremonial research into these furtive areas of post-colonial humanities. *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce—who listened to Louis Armstrong and loved blues and jazz music—provided another literary parallel to the Sun Ra experience. History, etymology, cosmology, enthnocentricity, eccentricity, humor, counterpoint, numerology, alienation, escape from the socially sanctioned norms are the major points of intersection I perceive between RA and Joyce and Joyous Noyse. Cheryl Herr of the University of Iowa writes:

As first in America and then across the water, an affiliation between Irishness and blackness was honed in the Afro-Hibernian crucible of the

minstrel show where Paddy and Sambo interchanged roles, created a matrix of longing that encompassed both the Irish lament and the Delta blues

—Irish Mornings

John Sinclair forwarded the memes of cultural transformation through unity of music and poetry and joyful noise, and has remained a literary and poetic gauge by which to help measure music, musicians and the cultural impact of music in the west, in particular the Black American heritage of blues and jazz in all its varied forms. With the violence, tragedy and struggle woven in and detailed along with the triumph, epiphany and beauty of this musical revolution.

John Sinclair, Amiri Baraka and a frightfully small handful of other music writers and musicological poets and artists continue the current of balanced social feedback based upon extensive experience and practice in-the-field working with the Sun Ra family and band, for over forty years in John's unique case.

Fela Kuti, John Coltrane, James Brown, Sun Ra, Robert Johnson, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, these jazz and blues men replastered the face of modern culture but have been almost whitewashed from censored history, I think, when viewed in comparison with other great American heroes who have been honored with institutes, statues, foundations and schools of music.

But difference between music for social change, equality, intelligence and community cohesion compared with modern POP music—that manufactured mush of low information—for the most part another commodity for financial profit, titillation, celebrity kicks, extortion, sedation, cultural manipulation and enthnocentric racial and sexually exploitative purposes.

The message becomes clearer now thanks to a few underground writers and critics still able to improvise their own thoughts and actions in a free way, breaking rules with a disciplined spirit of experimentation and knowledge and challenge the orthodox opinions about culture, heritage and humanity. Like that which Sun Ra radiated, the search for knowledge,

trying new things and seeing the world through new eyes—questioning everything, especially authority.

Now whatever you may be you are not an "animal", you are not a "body", because these are verbal labels. The is *of identity always carries the assignment of permanent condition. To stay that way. All name calling presupposes the* is *of identity. This concept is unnecessary in a hieroglyphic language like ancient Egyptian and in fact frequently omitted. No need to say the sun* is *in the sky, sun in sky suffices.*

—William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (p. 33)

I would like to raise some questions in conjunction with SUN RA SYSTEM that I feel may lead to a better cohesive strategy within the new emerging global tribal communities, both the community in and around Birmingham, England—where I grew up—and the communities I lived and worked amidst in America and in Europe, and towards a new global cultural meeting including everybody to attempt something approaching the best face we can put on the notion of democracy.

1. Identity and the Individual relationship with the state: Who and where are you?
2. The language of class warfare: Class and language and the relationships to culture?
3. Mythological Archetypes and Cultural Memes: Define yours.
4. Race, sex, ethnicity and history: In whose language, script and code?
5. Tribal bonds, ceremonies, rituals and group communication: activities, defined?
6. Who owns and who issues the means to distribution of cultural language and information?
7. How do cultural identities become so, the individual and state entity, and the alien?
8. What is your tale of the tribe: Can you describe another?
9. How does joyful noise and music help communicate the tale of the ethnic groups?

A few minutes spent reading into the life of Sonny Blount and his transformation into Sun Ra will inform the reader about the social struggles, trials and ordeals he endured—both physiological and psychological—that so many African American jazzmen encountered, being on the front line of the violent and brutal assault on culture during the period of Nazi-like medieval methods for social correction incorporating inhumane punishment throughout the birthing of jazz and blues in the United States.

The openly racist targeting of black artists, especially of the jazz persuasion, outlines one of the unbearable pressures looming over many of these musical geniuses and cultural iconoclasts—addictive drugs, poverty, family, health, geographical locale, finances etc. It is against this backdrop of tyranny and oppression of the creative and free individualism that defines ART in human beings, and against the constant struggle to get out from under the boot of ignorant authority that Sun Ra bursts onto the world scene.

Considering the racist historical period that he lived through RA achieved a remarkable and exemplary transformation of the negative forces of hatred, intolerance, bitterness and perpetual warfare he witnessed, into a joyful noise of forgiveness—wisdom poetry and a new language of new beginnings, and moving on into the future—the creation of a musical ark upon which humanity can break free from any shackles and re-balance the equation once more, taking into consideration the other planets and dark star clusters, the great cosmos and outer galaxies, the void, the gas.

But there is no escape from himself. Sun Ra confronts the daily myth with the openness and sincerity of a Zen monk, with adequate humor, repose, performance prowess, blurring the line between how you're living and how you're performing, making joyful noise and music his life blood and soul food—total communication and total immersion within the soundscape realities and so becoming, over time, through consistency of freedom: the physical embodiment of the sound, the polyrhythm and melody.

Reverse the process and you listen back to the music of Sun Ra and he lives within the music in a special and unique kind of way, the sound of disembodied shadows of a former world. Right there! in those spaces, yes.

With regard to jazz, the LP brought many changes, such as the cult of "real cool drool," because greatly increased length of a single side of a disk meant that the jazz band could really have a long and casual chat among its instruments.

—Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (p.282)

Sun Ra represented a twenty first century being, living his life as though far in the future, like in the world of Castalia created by Hermann Hesse in the classic book *Magister Ludi: The Glass Bead Game,* where a kind of musical chess language is performed as art over long periods of time, long enough to begin registering the movements of the cosmos. Sonny was not only living this way, but all the time composing, arranging, writing, radiating his swinging rhythm, melody, syncopation for the black nation.

Crafting tools for humanity to steer itself and spaceship earth through the unknown black mass of probabilities ahead of us, swirling about us in all directions like helium, bringing a mischievous smile to every face connected to ears that can listen to the creeping wonder and mystical surprise of cheeky chops, menacing changes, violent waves of percussion, battering of drum heads all pouring out into space—all-at-once—intertwined and entangled bits of the totality, bits probably caught in your ear for a split second, a split quarter note lingers, but TIME takes its course and winds down to a pulse, a base, a foundation. The Base, yes.

This language will be a tonal language like Chinese,
it will also have a hieroglyphic script as pictorial as possible
without being too cumbersome or difficult to write. This language
will give one option of silence. When not talking,
the user of this language can take in the silent images of the written,
pictorial and symbol languages.

—William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (p. 35)

THE MYSTICAL ESTATE, PART 1

STANDING IN THE SHADOW OF SUN RA

by Dylan Harding

FROM THE MOMENT the American inventor Thomas Edison created the means by which we could record vibrating airwaves, the road to hell has been paved with the rotting carcasses of criminally unscrupulous record company executives, publishers, club owners, journalists, distributors and all other forms of scum that prey on the creative talents of those who specialize in vibrating the air. Scouting for profit through sound recording has been the lifetime ambition of many a hustler, Saint Thomas Edison included. Musicians at his table always get served last, if at all.

Musicians create music through the medium of sound and ideas; scientists invent the technology to record and detect those sounds; beings from the murky world of commerce take that union and turn it into a business—a business based on allowing us the privilege of hearing those sounds. Recorded sound and musical ideas become property and with all property it has an owner.

Edison (son of a Canadian), the Bill Gates of his time, perfected the gramophone in 1877. His intention was to sell them and get rich. Subsequently, having one became all the rage. One of the side effects of his invention was that a viral epidemic invaded the bedrooms of ale swilling English children born in the forties with unbelievable names like John, Keith, or Brian and began to revive the learning of old forgotten American blues tunes from vinyl recordings.

Without any guidance except perhaps from a brutish teenager, many drunken British children would spend hours alone in their cold musty piss-sodden bedrooms, listening to and learning from spinning black disks that enchanted them significantly. This unsupervised disaster ultimately led to them congregating in rather large crowds and, as if gripped by a deranged fever, like being on drugs, they would in chorus chant some hippy shit

about peace and love. Apparently we should refer to this Dark Age of learning as the Renaissance. Thankfully, this persistent fever was finally eradicated by medical science with a substance commonly known as Disco in the year 1977.

To keep myself at a safe distance from the above-mentioned, I am writing this whilst my eye occasionally glances at a palm-sized 80 GB sound storage device. It is connected to the internet and potentially, therefore, to an enormous supply of source material which has through the magic of nerd power turned to digital information and is, at a cost, now at my disposal. For no other reason than to expand my curiously small mind, I hope one day to have access to every sound, film, television show, documentary, book, essay, poem, song, thesis, photograph and painting ever created. As I type this my eardrum is vibrating to sounds created in the fifties by Sun Ra.

John Coltrane, Andre 3000, Frank Zappa, Cecil Taylor, Sylvester Stewart and Charles Mingus all speak of Sun Ra's influence. Although acclaimed throughout the rest of the world, Sun Ra was, and is, little known in his country of birth, the USA. As with many American musicians ahead of their time, Sun Ra found his audience elsewhere. Music lovers, particularly in Europe, not only found his musical freedom and experimentation fascinating but also understood his showmanship as being in line with some of Europe's more daring avant-garde artistic movements. When attending a Sun Ra concert, you would not watch a group of self-absorbed free jazzers hoping to be revolutionary; you witnessed a theatrical and musical masterpiece that was unlike anything else.

Although issued a birth certificate from the state of Alabama, Sun Ra's actual birthplace was the planet Saturn. At a time when white America's fear of commies, invasion from outerspace, and civil rights was at its highest point, being black and from another planet must have made some sit uncomfortably on the old rocking chair as they looked upon the fading of their world. It is the classic was-he-or-was-he-not-joking double bluff. Only a master trickster like Sun Ra could pull off a lifetime of provocation-intended musical performance which combined pedigreed improvisers and Dadaist/vaudeville antics. If you did not get it then it was not his role to explain it to you.

Although his name does not appear alongside Armstrong, Parker, Ellington, Davis and Coltrane in standard jazz histories as one of the greats, his place and influence as a musician, composer, educator and performer within the history of twentieth century American music should not be reduced to a footnote. The above-mentioned gods knew of him—he was one of their own—and understood implicitly what he was playing at. One road trip through the deep south would ensure that they too could feel like beings from another planet.

Another eventual consequence of Edison's invention was to reduce the need to attend live music performance to hear music. Sun Ra's life was dedicated to keeping the core of his band working, and the economics of running a big band, let alone one as outside the spheres as his, can only seem strange to any good citizen that has a regular job. Many of Ellington's international tours were funded by the State Department; he was considered a good will ambassador abroad, yet although a living genius was unable to secure lodgings at some hotels at home due to having incorrect skin pigmentation. Finding paying work while sticking to your artistic principles is a financially risky pursuit. Sun Ra was so unique that fortunately his iconic status allowed his band just to stay afloat.

When Lennon and McStarbucks would write a song it would be transcribed by an employee to sheet music, registered with their publisher, and ownership would be established. They would then share royalties according to whatever contract they had signed. This is a standard procedure that most songwriters follow. However, what procedure do you follow if the driving force behind your musical output is to create improvisations based on sketches and loose instructions from a conductor or composer?

Sun Ra worked and created in the latter scenario and as a result, as could be expected, his estate is in disarray. An example of his instructions and sketches, taken from a 1985 work titled *Manifesto—Purpose and Intent,* is as follows: "21st Century of sound. In a diverse dimension and derivative sub-tones and over-tones." This is followed with further "musical indicators" throughout the piece, such as "city in the clouds," "love in outerspace," "bridge of the outer darkness." There is not a musical note in sight, yet musicians could perform the works under his guidance.

I currently have in my group of friends a man who was a friend and confidant of Sun Ra. Haf-fa Rool travelled alongside Sun Ra and his band for many years. He has witnessed first-hand the life lived by musicians brave and crazy enough to follow in the shadow of Sun Ra. Musical improvisation is hazardous to the financial health of those who create it and equally so to those who inherit the rights to it.

Haf-fa has been entrusted by Sun Ra to administer his legacy and he is currently doing this without financial recompense. Without the aid of music-business lawyers he battles against a chaotic paper trail of dubious origin in an attempt to establish his rightful role. He has been doing this since 1993. Sun Ra's music is being played constantly all over the world, but where the royalties for this are going is anyone's guess.

Haf-fa would love for this to be resolved as income generated could be spent spreading the philosophical, intellectual, comic and cosmic message of Sun Ra to new generations of music devotees. Perhaps all it will take is the generous help of a person with a little bit of expertise in music publishing. A few helpful hints and some simple guidance would possibly change this situation enormously.

It is saddening to see the legacy of one of music's true originals in such turmoil. Although many of us try to help Haf-fa when we can, we are first and foremost musicians and worshipers of music and not experts on the ins and outs of music publishing royalties. Sun Ra has left us all better off by vibrating the airwaves in a way that only a being from Saturn can. It is a great shame that the fruits of his legacy and cultural creation may possibly wither on the vine. Strange fruit. Strange fruit indeed.

Help!

THE MYSTICAL ESTATE, PART 2

AN INTERVIEW WITH HAF-FA ROOL
by David Kerekes & Caleb Selah
Turnpike Lane, London, July 8, 2007 &
Wood Green, London, October 2, 2009

HAF-FA ROOL: I'm not a musician and neither am I a scholar of music. As a consequence I'm in no position to give my views on Sun Ra's place or position in the hierarchy of music. However, we should try to find what is the source of his ideas. We're dealing with thought. His creations are his musical titles—in effect living equations, *transposed* equations that identify him and attach him to his living environment. To clear up this idea of a living equation: they're thought forms and they've been here as long as mankind has been able to figure things out. It's being creative and being able to transform, or to create a double of oneself; to be able to know of a life somewhere else while still in this body.

We need to understand thought as being the creator and the self-created, and being at the same time personal and universal. These things are not abstract. We're not dealing with abstract thought. This is the quintessence of thought, meaning something that is subcreated and is constituted of itself. So we have a creator who would define the attributes of the thing according to the blueprint; in accord with the thing that is about to be revealed or removed or to come into existence. Sun Ra as a person was wizened in these ways, and it's very possible he was fully aware of the laws and the living attributes of the world in which he created.

Mysticism is a word I don't really understand very much. I'd tend to side with intuitiveness. Intuitive means inner teaching, or *auto;* when one teaches oneself. The logic to this or the movement was always towards itself; something moving in itself or towards itself, becoming in itself. Unless it's someone involved in creative activity it is very difficult to explain these things. But with Sun Ra, what I grasped was that he received

a lot of help as a young person that permitted him to access a certain knowledge, a certain science, and acquire a certain discipline.

I'm going to give you an example of what I would call a living equation being transposed. Sun Ra has a composition called Enlightenment, and it is the sound of thought. Which is enlightenment. It represents a living reality. In its living context these are inherent truths. Not absolute, but inherent. Absolute comes with the capacities or the possibility of your thoughts. That's the way it is. For me, not being a musician but understanding the creative process is not a problem.

I've seen pre-concert rehearsals. I would see him and he would sit and tell the instrumentalists to, I don't know, play something. He would write out their parts for them straight away, and that's all part of the creative process: being able to transpose what one is able to apprehend. Sun Ra defines his music as being advanced and that implies his production consumes his entire life, both celestial and terrestrial. That's what he was saying in his music, in the titles of his compositions. It's about the power of thought and reality.

CALEB SELAH: *Where did you first meet Sun Ra?*

ROOL: I used to listen to Sun Ra's records, through a friend of a friend who was his manager. We would listen to his music—compositions he made in the sixties, the vinyls that came out on the Saturn label. *The Magic City* and stuff like that. My friend wrote articles. We went to a Sun Ra concert, and after the concert I approached Sonny on something that intrigued me about him. I was never really interested in his music, 'cos I never knew what he was playing anyway! I mean it was different—so you'd listen to it; it was vastly different in comparison to the stuff that was being put out at the time. Ok, so I posed the question as to his knowledge of the stuff that was written on the sleeve notes. The things he was referring to. What did he know about those things? He looked at me and said: "I don't like the look in his eyes"— meaning in *my* eyes. And that was that! The next time I saw him was in Europe in the late eighties. He had a concert in Paris and I thought I'd take a friend of mine and go by and see him.

SELAH: *What were you doing in Paris at the time?*

ROOL: I was living over there. I was painting. Me and my mate Rupert, we went over to Sonny's hotel to see him one night, and then I posed the question again. See, the question poses that if you're not interested in the man's music, *what are you interested in?* I mean why are you hanging with this guy? Today, people would describe it as mysticism, 'cos I was reading a lot of serious books at the time. Serious books that are available to us. Not necessary for me to mention names, but for instance the *Kabbala* and books of this particular genre. Ok, so when I saw Sonny in Paris, I was having some problems and I went back to him, and I posed the same question again. I asked him, without actually stating in terms, but hinting to him: "If you're in charge of all this kinda information, how could you deny *me* some of it?" Right? So then he talked to John [Gilmore, saxophonist] and he said to John: "You know what? He's after the secrets." But then he turned around and he gave me some notes. He noted some stuff on a piece of paper, which turned out to be an original alphabet, the first ten letters of an alphabet, one to ten, but the letters were different! The positions were different. Instead of A B C you had like "I" as 1 and "T" is 2 and "B" is 3. I was able to assimilate that because I was familiar with the signs, the letters and *Kabbala* and dealing with that kinda stuff. But anyone who dealt into that, even superficially, would realize that you can't really make no head or tail of it unless someone takes you into it. Not only that, you have to eventually create your own alphabet. And that was that. Then I stayed in France and I would see him whenever he came by; I'd go on the road with him on a couple of occasions.

SELAH: *What was that like?*

ROOL: It was rough. I mean it was fun but it was rough. You can imagine traveling with eighteen guys on the road with all this paraphernalia and stuff. We had these journeys across Europe by train. You had buses for certain connections. I give you an example: in 1985—1985 was the last one I'd been with him—we started in Paris, then we went to Amsterdam and from Amsterdam we went to Hamburg and from Hamburg we went to Innsbruck and from Innsbruck we go back to Frankfurt, and from

Frankfurt we ended up in Spain, in Madrid. That's by bus! Coming back we had the train. Well, in short, these train drives are pretty exhausting—sitting on a train your butt gets tired. It's the changing and connections. When you have to change from one train and you have just two minutes, so I mean you hit the ground and you start throwing the stuff off before the train stops!

DAVID KEREKES: *What was the popularity of the band at this time?*

ROOL: He's always had his particular group of people who followed him. Even though he deliberately kept a low profile he did have the support of his fans. Concerning Europe, the first visit he made to Europe was in 1970. That was in St Paul de Vence. That was the Nights of the Foundation Maeght, and they were having a Franco-American thing and invited all the people who were 'out front' at that particular time: Lichtenstein the painter, Cecil Taylor the musician, Sun Ra . . . That was Sonny's first visit to Europe, and then he came to London. What was it? The Queen Elizabeth Hall?

SELAH: *Yes, down on the South Bank.*

ROOL: Another place was in west London. the Wigmore Hall? I'm staying in Europe, and as I said, he'd come over every two years, or I'd go over. If I went on tour with him, I'd have my room, ticket. I'd generally be taken care of cos we were friends.

KEREKES: *So how would it play on the road with him?*

ROOL: I had to work like everybody else. I could not appear to be just hanging around, 'cos the rest of the guys wouldn't like that! I just had to be a baggage handler, in other words, at the same time engaging him in conversation. So I'd be there, you know, we would sit and talk, we would discuss and we'd be talking about stuff that interests me, 'cos there's a lot of things to talk about and a lot of notes to be made. Also, I'd be brought into the picture as to the state of the band . . . You had something called the "shit list." What he called the "shit list," but he'd call it "God *Shit List"* On this list he'd have the names of the people who had crossed him. He had that list on him. He had a very good idea as to the

psychology of all the people who worked for him, who were in the band at the time, not only their musical capabilities, but also their social. Yeah, and what their potentials are. And we were talking 'bout those things. We didn't talk about music because I'm not playing music! I remember him saying to me: "You don't know anything about jazz!" I said: " 'Course I don't know anything about jazz." He continued: "A lot of people don't know anything about jazz. You know it's a way of life." Then he began telling me 'bout bits of stuff, like stories and bits of the relationships with this musician and that, so I'd more or less have a kind of picture as to what kind of people these musicians were.

SELAH: *Did you get into the business side of things at that stage?*

ROOL: No, no, we wouldn't talk about business because nobody knew his business! Let me dwell on that a little bit. Sonny trusted nobody for the reasons that were obvious! To what extent I didn't know, but he would always say: "You see these guys around here? Don't trust them, because you don't know 'em!" But it's only later that I got to understand the depth of this "mistrust" word!

SELAH: *And how did that manifest itself?*

ROOL: I didn't really know. I mean if you were to go around with a band today and start fraternizing, someone's going to come to you eventually and say to you: "Look, don't trust these guys" One has to understand the social environment in which he was in, and the types of people he had in his band. You must appreciate the fact he had the door of his house always open—there was never a lock on that door. It's a revolving door, people in and out. So when you have such a situation, unless you're under the influence of some kind of mind-confusing substance, obviously you'd know: "I'm having my door open, I've got to be careful." After that I heard lots of stories of things that were happening round the house where he lived. From *one* person, 'cos the majority of the other guys in the band didn't have nothing to say because they didn't live with us. So, I would be bought into the picture concerning strange things that were happening. and strange things apparently always *did* happen around him.

KEREKES: *Do you have any examples?*

ROOL: People who were supposed to be dead . . . Very, very, strange stuff! People were dead and he was supposed to show up later. And stuff like that. How would he know? Because people would say: "I just saw this guy and he's coming around." I'm just giving you an example: they had a concert, and the guy who wrote a tune called Enlightenment—Hobart Dotson— someone came backstage during the concert and told him that he had this guy in this white suit, was named so and so, and he was out there! So you hear a lot of strange things, things of a spiritual nature, very, very strange things. I had inklings but I couldn't put a finger on it. Sonny would bring me back bits of paper, these leaflets or these pamphlets, so it would seem that a lot of people would send him a lot of things. That's only one aspect, a visible aspect. Beyond that I couldn't say for sure.

KEREKES: *When was the last time you saw Sun Ra?*

ROOL: I saw him when he had his first stroke and that was in Paris in 1991, and I saw him after that in England at Ronnie Scott's. That was after his second attack.

KEREKES: *What has happened in the years since then?*

ROOL: Well, ok, what you're trying to get out is how I got into the business aspect. I'd always heard rumors that he'd always grumbled about something, he was always grumbling about these people not paying him. He kept saying: "Why won't they pay me my money?" It's futile to ask questions if you're not directly associated! So I did!

So a question came up after his first stroke. I remember we were in Paris, and I'm saying to him: "Sonny, why do you come round in this condition?" Meaning on his wheelchair, and he said: "Well, I just came out to see how I felt." We got to talking and he said to me: "Why don't you help me with this stuff?" *What stuff?* I've been hearing him talking 'bout doing this stuff for years! He began to explain to me that France is the only country in which he never received any royalties. I says: "Well, how could you let that happened?" And he says: "Well, you just cannot be crazy 'bout creativity

and the money at the same time." Right? So I said I'll see what I can do. I picked up the phone and called *Jazz Magazine,* called Phillipe Carles the editor, and he suggested I speak to someone at the copyright protection society of France. I called them up and I put Sonny on the phone to the man, who said: "You have to join us." Sonny sent his secretary Spencer. He ran over there, to bring the forms over, fill the forms out. I read them. Ok, you sign this. Sonny went away, back to America, and I sat on the papers until London. When I came back to London Sonny approached me again and I decided I'm gonna get this stuff done. I'm gonna pay the fee and get it done and that's it. This was summertime, it wasn't cold. In November of the very same year, Sonny calls me and says: "Look, Haf-fa, I think you better get me out of here. These people are trying to kill me." I say: "What do you mean they're trying to kill you?" "Just get me out of here." So, I talked to my girl, who I lived with . . .

KEREKES: *Get him out of what?*

ROOL: Get him out of where he lived. *America!* He wanted to come over to me in Paris. So I spoke to my girlfriend: "Sonny just said to me these people are trying to kill him." I thought about it for a couple of days and I went back to the editor of *Jazz Magazine,* and he put out an advert for a house swap! And I had a couple of interested parties who wanted to rent their houses and stuff like that. One was overlooking the Black Forest, the other one was going down to a place called Caste, going southwest to Spain. We are talking about October or November. January he was in a hospital. They took him from hospital to hospital. It's a funny situation 'cos you didn't know what was going on. Every time I would call him, I couldn't make head nor tails of it. The strange thing is those telephone conversations were interrupted. Someone would pull the plug out! We made arrangements that he should leave the hospital, get on a plane and arrive in Paris, regardless of his condition. But then, if you're living with people you don't trust, for whatever reason, for whatever, you simply don't.

SELAH: *If we just go back a bit. What were your final words with him?*

ROOL: Before he died I spoke to him over at his sister's house, which is over in Alabama. I spoke to him and I spoke to her also, and they kept me informed. As a matter of fact his associate, Abraham, called me at 2:00 am and told me the time he died. Abraham was his business associate. Alton Abraham. He was supposedly a business man. He helped Sonny quite a lot with the recording aspect. As it appears now, not in practical terms as he just simply gave the money to someone to go do this stuff.

KEREKES: *What's the business situation now? What is it you're trying to do?*

ROOL: I'm just trying to be paid for all the time that I've put into it, that's basically what I'm interested in right now. Because Sonny's family are not interested in anything! They don't really care. They said as much. They're not interested because they don't need no money; they're already retired, they have their own money! That's how it is. His sister married. I'm not sure if she's still alive, she was ninety three ten years ago; thirteen years ago! I'm not even sure she's still alive! I mean she stated categorically that's the worst thing that could've happened to her, that they should've bought Sonny to *her* house to die, when he has a house of his own! Actually, the day in question was the Friday he was supposed to check out of the hospital and someone was supposed to take him to the airport. Now when I called, someone I knew very well answered the phone and said to me he was taking Sun Ra to Alabama, and he didn't know 'bout any other possible arrangements. Ok, this guy took him to Alabama and what we know happened: Sonny contracted pneumonia on the trip, and that's it. The legal status is that he died intestate. He had no will. But he did leave me with a written paper authorizing me to continue doing what I'm doing.

SELAH: *Which is? In one sentence.*

ROOL: Oh, just take care of his legal affairs. Reclaim royalties. It means two things: Go to the BMI [Broadcast Music Inc, the US body that collects license fees and distributes royalties to songwriters, composers and music publishers] and go to the Library of Congress. I was unable to go to the Library of Congress, but I did write concerning the

compositions that were there. Through the copyright societies in France we were able to establish a database; and thank goodness during his time in America he was a member of a copyright society as a composer and not as a publisher. He kept that covered! Generally in America the record companies control the publishing aspects, and his associate believed that somehow he had rights to the name Sun Ra, which he didn't have. That entire business is a non profitable organization really, as there's no record of any kind of business dealing or anything. So, today, we have a court, we have letters of administration been granted to a niece, because the sister is not interested. Neither was her nephew, who was in California at the time. They were not interested. And before any lawyer stepped in, the family gave me a new power of attorney, a new document, the three of them: his sister, the administrator and the nephew. I had taken the precaution to address a letter to the court with a copy of this document, which was handed over to the attorney. But when the lawyers came in they decided they have to change everything, it's not good enough. The attorney sat on it for ten years and he did nothing, he just screamed at everybody and chased everybody away. He was removed five years ago. Now someone else has been put on the matter, who's totally in the dark about this kind of business!

From the original database, which came out in 1993, three months before Sonny died, the ownership of the compositions were established, I mean we had the original BMI registrations. I found the MCPS [Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society] had 191 compositions on *their* database whose origins were unknown, and that is the state of the situation today.

KEREKES: *These are Sun Ra compositions?*

ROOL: Yeah, as to where they were originally registered is unknown. On the MCPS, 191 compositions were handed over five years ago to a company here in England. If you know what a copyright database looks like, you will see there is something that is missing—which is where they were originally registered. They don't have that. Every composition has a number, which is known as the CAE code, an international code, that's where they pay the money on. All Sun Ra's compositions were registered in America, and I have that database. The European database contains all

the international documentation concerning those compositions *sent to Europe.* The difference between Europe and the United States is that in Europe Sonny's copyright protection is double. They're *dual!* Whereas in America you have to join two different societies. With MCPS I have an account number which the money is paid to, ok? And then I have a different account number over here, so it's changed around, the money is going somewhere else.

KEREKES: *Whose account is it? Where's the money going?*

ROOL: *[Laughs.]* It's going to a guy. . . . The copyright society says the money is staying "in care of the administrator" to an account in New York. The administrator says: "Look, I never had any agreement with such and such a person, ok?" But we know where the money is going. The money is going into the hands of one of his enemies.

KEREKES: *The money is not going to the musicians?*

ROOL: No, they're not getting anything! Forget it! Nobody is thinking about no musicians . . . nobody is even thinking about me! If I were getting something maybe I could slip something to the musicians, because there are lots of things to be done. But I'm not getting any money; the musicians are probably getting five or ten dollars, somewhere. They don't own the stuff anyway, not theirs!

KEREKES: *Who is getting the money?*

ROOL: Oh, the money is not going . . . The money's not even properly collected.

KEREKES: *What's the status of the Sun Ra recordings? Do you have any of the original masters?*

ROOL: The only one I have is a concert I put together—not a concert but a unique *presentation* of his music, because he played with a symphonic orchestra. I had forty two pieces on that and I recorded that. It's not *Disco 3000,* it's *Symphonic Orchestra.* The rest of the stuff, I sold it over the years. I sold a couple to Leo Records over here in England. That's how it is.

SUN RA ON FILM

The Cry of Jazz (35 minutes, b&w, 1959)
A Film by Edward O. Bland. Featuring Sun Ra and His Arkestra. Starring George Walker, Dorthea Horton, Linda Dillon, Andrew Duncan, James Miller, Laroy In-man, Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra

Space Is the Place (82 minutes, color, 1972)
Director: John Coney. Featuring The Intergalactic Myth-Science Arkestra. Starring Sun Ra, Ray Johnson, Christopher Brooks, Barbara Deloney

THE CRY OF JAZZ

by John Sinclair

NOW THAT SUN RA has been missing from our particular planet for a few sad years, any previously unheard music by Ra's stellar Arkestra issued in present time is a welcome addition to the great composer's voluminous discography. And to gain access to performance footage of Ra's incredible late fifties Chicago ensemble in action is a rare and even more exciting prospect.

The Cry of Jazz, filmed in Chicago by experimental filmmaker, composer and arranger Edward O. Bland and finished in 1959, offers both music and performance footage of the original edition of the Arkestra in splendid abundance. Arkestra fanatics will thrill to the sight and sound of John Gilmore's saxophone, the dramatic bass of Ronnie Boykins and the stellar contributions of other members of the ensemble as they negotiate a set of Ra's classic early compositions in an intimate concert setting.

The Arkestra performances that provide the soundtrack for *The Cry of Jazz* underline and accent Bland's relentlessly didactic storyline and offer vivid visual contrast to the extended narrative scenes which depict a group of collegiate jazz enthusiasts heatedly engaged in a profound intellectual discussion centered on the politics of music and race and the definition, meaning and future of jazz.

Bland's passionate, well-ordered polemic—extremely advanced for the late fifties—presents a systematic economic analysis of the social forces which produced and shaped the music called jazz, carefully relates them to the shape and form of the music then prevalent, and boldly forecasts what he calls 'the death of jazz' that will be administered by a new experimental movement led by creative artists and composers (here typified by Sun Ra) who are dedicated to freeing the music from its historical strictures, reflecting the social conditions of the present, and projecting and interpreting the world of the future.

At first the story proceeds with excruciating slowness: a college jazz society meeting breaks up, leaving behind a group of stragglers—a pair of white women, a white man and two black men—who continue the discussion among themselves and soon reach sharp disagreement on the issues of where jazz originated, what forces shaped its development and why it sounded the way it did. Then one of the black men seizes center stage and carefully unfolds his increasingly radical analysis until his listeners are left virtually stupefied and without coherent response.

Sun Ra & the Arkestra lay down a pulsating track of sound under the narration and serve to punctuate the protagonist's long, engrossing lecture with appropriate segments of performance footage and musical counterpoint. It's easy to picture Sun Ra enthusiasts editing together these Arkestral appearances and eliminating the talking parts altogether, but inquisitive viewers may gain immensely from exposure to Bland's fiercely iconoclastic exposition on the state of African American creative music on the historical cusp of the modern jazz era and the free jazz, avant-garde, New Black Music movement of the sixties.

The MVD *Unheard Music Series* edition of *The Cry of Jazz,* digitally transferred from a pristine print, is the first commercial release of this forty five year old film, and the Arkestral soundtrack has remained otherwise unreleased. Now you may enjoy the singular treats of Sun Ra's incomparable music and Edward Bland's startling filmic treatise in the privacy and comfort of your home, and you are hereby advised to do so.

—Detroit
May 17, 2004

SPACE IS THE PLACE
by David Kerekes

DECKED IN THE FINE REGALIA of a pharoah and flanked by two golden familiars, an elderly black man materialises in the middle of a downtown social club where black youth are enjoying themselves singing, chatting and playing games. The young people stop in their tracks, bemused by the eccentric vision before them.

"Greetings black youth of planet Earth," says the stranger. "I am Sun Ra, ambassador from the intergalactic regions of the council of outerspace."

The response is one of scepticism. Some members of the group question the mysterious visitor, who responds with silence and a benign smile.

"Why are your shoes so big?"

"Are those moon shoes?"

"How do we know you're fo' real?"

"Yeah, how do we know you're not somebody else, telegraphed to promote shit or somethin'?"

"Who are you?"

"What kind of shoes is that you got on your feet?"

"Yeah, what are all those funny clothes? Shit, I'm about to take off runnin' if somebody walkin' down the street talkin' about [inaudible] me going to out-erspace."

"Is he fo' real?"

This is a sequence that appears in the movie *Space Is the Place.* The movie is a pretty topsy-turvy affair and this sequence isn't staged, but reflects the very real reaction of the public when confronted with the musician known as Sun Ra. In this instance the public happens to be black but it's unlikely it would be any less aghast if it were red, white or blue.

Sun Ra lowers his smile to finally respond to the jibes and laughter.

"How do you know I'm real?" he says. "I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did you people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as a reality;

I come to you as a myth. Because that's what black people are. Myths. I came from a dream that black man dreamed long ago. I'm actually a present sent to you by your ancestors."

Next to the other writers in this book I would class myself a novice when it comes to Sun Ra. Although conscious of Sun Ra's cultural cache and considerable influence as a musician for some time, my first real exposure to the music occurred only relatively recently. It was a scratchy vinyl copy of *Helico-centric Worlds, Volume 2,* left for me on my doorstep by a gentleman friend of a neighbour called Mutley. It was some time before I got round to listening to it. What struck me when I did was how far out it sounded for 1965, the year of its release. I studied the packaging carefully for clues.

Comprising only three tracks, the music on *Helicocentric Worlds, Volume 2* is very loose and as I listened I waited for a song to start, or at the very least the essence of a riff upon which I could get my ears into gear. Nothing; there is no margin for my ears on that album. That is until halfway through side two, when the music on a track called Cosmic Chaos suddenly locks in a groove and refuses to let go. It is a kind of hip hop recursion of everything else on the album and way ahead of its time, emerging some years before hip hop would eventually manifest in the Bronx to take down the world.

The strange beat went on for nearly twenty minutes before I realised the locked grove was indeed a locked groove and the needle was stuck on Mutley's scratchy record.

I concluded my listening. The album is 'experimental' and while I understand Sun Ra's music often foretastes contemporary styles, hip hop on *Heliocentric Worlds, Volume 2* isn't one of them.

A sobering introduction to The Ra, as it is a lesson for anyone who would go looking for clues. Nonetheless it failed to put me in any better stead for my next exposure to the musician from Saturn. *Space Is the Place* is a remarkable mixed up movie that masquerades as science fiction while dallying with a wealth of other cinematic forms, notably documentary, art house, blaxploitation and the concert film. It stars Sun Ra as himself, who comes to Oakland, California, in a spaceship with his crew the Arkestra. Ignoring the convolutions of style and form, the story that unfolds is a

relatively straightforward one: Sun Ra's mission is to save the Earth through music, predominately the black man with whom he shares an affinity. Concert performances succeed in creating a greater rift with the white man, but it is actually an entity called the Overseer that is the real nemesis, a black pimp devil with whom Sun Ra must do battle on a psychic plane. Ultimately Sun Ra fails to save anybody and leaves Earth moments before it explodes.

This fictional narrative, at times improvised and underscored with endearingly cheesy special effects, is intercut with Sun Ra espousing his philosophical and political beliefs direct to camera. The movie is fragmented further by avant-garde intermissions, such as the Arkestra taking a psychedelic walk, or a mysterious encounter with the Overseer at a table in the middle of nowhere. Whenever the story disengages from the plot it never seems to fully engage with it again. It picks up instead someplace else, flip-flopping between characters we don't fully understand.

No surprise at all that following a brief theatrical run in 1974 the movie dropped from the radar to languish in obscurity—not so much forgotten as completely ignored. A quick perusal of the key books on cult and fantasy movies of this era reveals not a single reference to *Space Is the Place.* There is no mention of it in the heavyweight Aurum encyclopaedia of science fiction either, or the usually reliable *NME* guide to rock cinema. Indeed, the movie has only emerged as a "cult classic" thanks to the resuscitative power of DVD. "Cult classic" is an accolade as instant as packet-soup but in this instance a deserved one.

The notion of music as the means of intergalactic communication appears again a few years later in Steven Spielberg's considerably more coherent *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). An altogether more sobering influence however would be on the rock monolith Led Zeppelin, whose very own cinematic folly *The Song Remains the Same* (1976) similarly befuddles fantastical elements with concert footage.

What sets *Space Is the Place* apart as a unique piece of cinema is, of course, the presence of Sun Ra. This is his one and only foray into feature films and from all accounts an experience he rather enjoyed. He travels through the movie in a sort of diasporan blur, not really on the same plane as the actors around him. There is a sense that Sun Ra is merely an

observer; an umlaut on the story of which he is a part. He marks time until ready to perform his music or provide a theory or two, be it racist or existential. He is a magnetic presence for sure, unafraid of ridicule in order to stand apart.

The scene in which he appears in the community hall and responds with noble aplomb to the jibes and questions of the black youth to me best sums up this film and the strange attraction of its star.

SUN RA OBITUARY

Born: **May 22, 1914, Birmingham, Alabama**
Died: **May 30, 1993, in Birmingham, Alabama**

by John Sinclair
New Orleans Times-Picayune

JAZZ LOVERS lost one of the most colorful and beloved figures in contemporary creative music when pianist-composer-bandleader Sun Ra left planet Earth at 1:30 pm Sunday, May 30.

Sun Ra made his transition quietly at Princeton Baptist Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama, where he had been hospitalized under intensive care since suffering the last in a series of crippling strokes.

Ra had continued to perform on keyboards and direct his Arkestra from a wheelchair following his first stroke in 1990, but his performing career came to a tragic end in the summer of 1992, only weeks after a triumphant July 4th concert in New York's Central Park featuring the Arkestra and rock band Sonic Youth.

Sun Ra was memorialized by family and friends on June 5 at Buchelon Funeral Home in Birmingham, while Arkestra members mounted a full-scale musical tribute to their departed leader the same night at the Bottom Line nightclub in New York City.

During Sun Ra's hospitalization the Arkestra performed under the direction of John Gilmore and intends to continue to present the "sacred arrangements, compositions and poetry created by the world's premiere avant-garde master."

Future billing is being projected as "The Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of John Gilmore featuring Michael Ray." Ray is the New Orleans-based trumpet star who has been with the Arkestra since 1978.

Sun Ra maintained the Arkestra continuously for forty years, rising from obscure Chicago origins to the heights of international acclaim as the

premiere avant-garde big band in jazz. Like Duke Ellington, Sun Ra developed the Arkestra as a means of realizing his unique compositional concepts and created works built around the brilliant improvisational contributions of life members like John Gilmore, Pat Patrick and Marshall Allen.

Born Herman Blount May 22, 1914, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Sun Ra began to emerge as a musical force shortly after World War II. He worked with Fletcher Henderson's orchestra at Chicago's Club DeLisa during 1946-47, graduated to house pianist and musical director at several prominent Windy City showbars, and organized his distinctive Arkestra around 1952 to perform his idiosyncratic jazz compositions and arrangements.

At this point the pianist also took the name "Le Sun Ra" and began to reveal his cosmic space-age philosophy through his compositions, song titles, poetry, elaborate costumery, and, beginning in 1956, a series of iconoclastic LPs under his own Saturn Records imprint.

Packaged in crude space-age covers and bearing titles like *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth, We Travel the Spaceways, Super-Sonic Jazz* and *Secrets of the Sun,* these albums presented the innovative, often startling compositional creations of Sun Ra delivered with exceptional musicianship by the Solar Arkestra.

Sun Ra's avant-garde works utilized elements like a "space key," where the players were instructed to improvise without regard for conventional tonal centers; superimposition of one chord over another; modal pieces with no fixed harmonic structure; and songs played in multiple keys. His works wove a musical tapestry of unusual rhythms and colors, swinging like crazy at will or moving entirely out of regular time to project an evocative outerspace groove.

Sun Ra also introduced several fresh, daring instrumental concepts during the mid fifties, including early use of electric piano, Solovox, Clavioline, Hammond organ, Farfisa organ and electric bass; creating an acoustic and electric bass team; utilizing two drummers and exotic miscellaneous percussion to create unprecedented polyrhythms; crafting features for two baritone saxophones and other unusual combinations of

instruments; and insisting that his saxophonists double on flute, oboe, bassoon, and bass clarinet.

As a bandleader, Sun Ra insisted on a high level of musical and orchestral discipline as a means to unprecedented freedom of expression. These goals were achieved through long hours of daily rehearsals over a forty year period, augmented by the leader's endless lectures on every topic under the sun.

Historically, Sun Ra's writing and arranging followed the advances made by Tadd Dameron and Jimmy Mundy in the forties and were contemporaneous with the experimental writing of Charles Mingus and George Russell. His musical concepts and extra-musical concerns deeply influenced jazz giants like John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Cecil Taylor, as well as an entire generation of Chicago musicians who became active in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

Sun Ra also had a deep and lasting effect on the self-determination movement in jazz: he operated his own label, Saturn Records; his own music publishing company, Enterplanetary Koncepts; and his own production company, Infinity Inc. While he recorded for a variety of labels, including Transition, Savoy, ESP-Disk, Blue Thumb, and ABC/Impulse, Ra continued to issue albums on Saturn Records so that his music could be documented and made available to his small but fanatical public.

During the seventies and throughout the eighties Sun Ra broadened the Arkestra's musical pallette to include classical jazz pieces from the twenties and thirties by Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins and others. He also contributed compelling arrangements of pop standards like Stardust, Deep Purple and Over The Rainbow.

These traditional elements were woven into the Arkestra's seamless five-hour presentations along with Ra's space anthems, wild solo and group improvisations, throbbing massed percussion, and June Tyson's other-worldly vocals. Almost invariably, at some point in the performance the entire Arkestra would leave the stage to chant and snake-dance through the audience.

Sun Ra was a thoroughly unique individual whose provocative persona generated endless myth and controversy. To hear him expound his

philosophical equations and his views on the future of interplanetary humanity was always a delightful experience. And to witness his outlook in action as interpreted by the Solar Arkestra—or Myth-Science Arkestra, Astro-Infinity Arkestra, Inter-Galactic Discipline Arkestra, Omniverse Jet-Set Arkestra—provided aesthetic thrills beyond measure.

There was only one Sun Ra, and now, finally, he's gone. But his music and performance design will live on through the continued existence of the Arkestra, and his epochal recordings of the fifties and sixties are now being made available to contemporary audiences.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

AMIRI BARAKA is America's greatest living poet. Born in Newark October 7, 1934, Baraka is the author of *Blues People, Black Music, Home, The Dead Lecturer, Dutchman* and *The Slave* amongst numerous other brilliant publications. Baraka was briefly Poet Laureate of New Jersey and since 2002 Poet Laureate of the Newark Public Schools. Baraka's honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Langston Hughes Award from the City College of New York, The Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama, an induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Before Columbus Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award.

Poet/percussionist/performer/producer **SADIQ BEY,** a native of Detroit's west side, is presently based in Berlin. He has performed and recorded with Griot Galaxy, Geri Allen, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Fifth Dimension, Eartha Kitt, Brandon Ross, the Mbase Group, MFA Kera, Gebhard Ullmann and Don Byron *(The Tuskegee Experiments)* among many others, and written and recorded with the Italian group Dina-mitri, the opera composer Stefan Winter, Uri Caine, and a limited edition, handmade box set of film music entitled *Variety Show.* <sadiqbey@allzeitmusik.de> <www.myspace.com/schwartzegeist> <www.hobnox.com/schwartzegeist>

MAT COLEGATE is a poet and musician living in London. His first collection of poetry, *Black Triangle Scrapings* was recently published by the Desperation press. He is a member of the bands Teeth of the Sea and Medicine and Duty, and can sometimes be found poncing about in ostrich feathers and emitting shrill noises as Brian Eno in Roxy Music tribute band Proxy Music.

JERRY DAMMERS was leader and lead composer for the British group The Specials and is now directing a large London based improvisational

ensemble called Spatial AKA Orchestra that debuted with a program of Sun Ra compositions and has since expended to investigate diverse contemporary musical idioms. They went on the road in March 2010. <www.jerrydammers.com >

PETER DENNETT is the man behind Art Yard, an independent record company based in London and established in 2004 to bring some of Sun Ra's lesser known works to new generations of listeners. For more info: <artyardinfo@gmail.com>

BEN EDMONDS is the author of the award winning *Marvin Gaye: What's Going On and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* and his long awaited biography of MC5, *No Greater Noise.* He's worked for The Doors and written for everyone from *Creem* to *Rolling Stone* to *Mojo* magazine, which he serves as American Editor from his base in Detroit.

GREGORY EGO (aka Gregory Daurer) is a singer-songwriter, author of the novel *A Western Capitol Hill,* and a freelance scribe and photographer. As a journalist, he's interviewed writers and artists (TC Boyle, Tom Robbins, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Kinky Friedman and Ralph Steadman) for publications as diverse as *Salon. com, Juxtapoz, High Times* and *Headpress.* < gregoryego.com >

STEVEN FLY AGARIC is an author, drummer, turntablist and a director of the MaybeLogic Foundation. His new novel, *Our Historys Back,* describes a scene where the protagonist, DJ Plush from 2012, cuts up his dream diary using modified turntable tools and produces a compressed prose code. Fly's brand new publication *Shannan-igums Wave* is available at < www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/shannanigums-wave/7641603 > Now based in Texas, **PETER GERSHON** is founder, publisher and editor of the great creative music magazine *Signal To Noise,* for whom he prepared his survey of the Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of Marshall Allen this past summer.

DAVID KEREKES is co-founder of Headpress and co-author of the books *See No Evil* and *Killing for Culture.* He is author of *Sex Murder Art* and

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DAVID HENDERSON was a founder of the Black Arts Movement in the sixties, an editor of the *East Village Other* and has been an active member of New York's lower east side arts community for more than four decades. Henderson's four volumes of poetry include *Da Mayor of Harlem,* and he's recorded his works with Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, David Murray and "Butch" Morris. His acclaimed biography of Jimi Hendrix, *Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child* was issued in a new edition in 2006.

Guitarist/composer **WAYNE KRAMER** emerged with MC5 as a powerful proponent of the electric guitar and has recently performed with the Sun Ra Arkestra as well as composing and performing music for film and television, including the score for the documentary, *Narcotics Farm,* about the federal penal facility at Lexington, Kentucky. Based in Los Angeles, he records for his own label, MuscleTone Records.

Trumpeter/composer **MICHAEL RAY** has served as the Cosmic Tone Specialist for Sun Ra and His Arkestra since 1978 and maintained a dual residency with Kool & The Gang over the same period. Based in New Orleans during the nineties, he headed his own colorful ensemble, Michael Ray & The Cosmic Krewe, recording for Evidence, Monkey Hill and Base Camp Records.

HAF-FA ROOL traveled with, and was a confidant of, Sun Ra. He has collaborated with artist David Hammons, contributing to the exhibition Quiet As It's Kept < www. christinekoeniggalerie.com > and the book *Blues and the Abstract Truth* < artecontem poranea.com > He is currently trying to reclaim the royalties on the Sun Ra recordings.

CALEB SELAH is the Headpress service engineer.

In 1969, the poet-provocateur, MC5 manager and White Panther **JOHN SINCLAIR** found himself the victim of that decade's draconian American drug laws—facing a twenty year jail sentence for the possession of two joints. The counterculture Sinclair helped create came to his rescue, however, when John Lennon, Stevie Wonder, Phil Ochs and others performed at a successful benefit gig to petition for his release. Since that epochal moment, Sinclair has traveled the globe with his Beat verses and inimitable growl, performing with some of the world's finest musicians. He interviewed Sun Ra in 1966.

The Detroit-based baritone saxophonist and bandleader **RICK STEIGER** organized the Sun Messengers in the late seventies and has prospered with the band ever since. His album *Open The Doors* with the Sun Sounds Orchestra on Eastlawn Records is a Motor City classic.

DAN WHITE is an illustrator and comic artist living and working in London. He provides the weekly comic strip *Terminus* for the website Mindless Ones: www.mind-lessones.com. You can also check his blog *Milk the Cat* out at < milkthecat.wordpress. com > and can contact him at < thebeastmustdie@hotmail.co.uk > He once had a scary dream about baboons and still can't walk past them at the zoo.

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